

Spiritual Exercises for strengthening faith

Ruth Boehm

The village of Gindiri, Nigeria, where I live, has two major political leaders, a local area chief and an overall chief. One is Muslim and the other is Christian. Tensions between Muslims and Christians are high at times. When asked recently what villagers can do to increase the peace, both chiefs responded that Muslim leaders need to teach their people to be good Muslims, and Christian leaders need to teach their people to be good Christians: if people are faithful to God, the violence will cease.

How do Christian leaders help people become better Christians? In sixteenth-century Spain, Ignatius of Loyola

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developed an aid for deepening faith, a series of meditations he called *Spiritual Exercises*. Still in use today, the exercises lead the believer through an intense period—originally thirty days—of prayer and reflection.¹ Retreatants begin with a time of preparation in which they learn a variety of methods of prayer, above all seeking to know how much the God who created them loves them. After this period of preparation, the exercises are divided into four weeks, each with a unique focus: sin and repentance, the call to follow Jesus, the call to suffer with

Jesus, the resurrection. Each “week” may last a month or more, as participants experience the particular gift of God in that area before moving on to the next emphasis.

Daily prayer time begins with a prayer for a gift, or grace, that is sought. In the period of preparation, for example, one prays: “I desire and choose only what helps me toward the end for which I am created.” Scripture is central to each daily time of prayer, and one learns ways of praying with Scripture. One may use the same passage of Scripture for several days. The goal is not merely to

read the passage and understand it with one's mind, but to reflect on the passage until one experiences God speaking through it.

This process of meditation on Scripture and one's experience is intended for those who want to know God more deeply and hear anew the call to follow Christ. It can be used directly by individuals, indirectly by pastors for congregations, and as one of many tools for those preparing for church leadership roles. Because many people now are unable to set aside time for a month-long retreat, the exercises have been adapted so people with busy lives can follow the process over a period of months. Participants may meet weekly for half an hour with a spiritual director for accountability, encouragement, and instruction on aspects of prayer. Reporting addresses not so much the details of what happened each day in prayer, but how one is experiencing the gifts of grace. Spiritual directors aid directees in making connections between the "grace that is desired" and the experiences of their everyday lives.

I was first introduced to *The Spiritual Exercises* in the early 1990s through the Take and Receive Series.² I used the books for my personal prayer time. A few years later I spent ten months using the exercises and meeting weekly with a spiritual director. During this intense and rewarding time I experienced anew the call to ministry. The emphases and the methods of prayer changed the way I approach preaching and pastoral care. Still later, in 1999–2000, in St. Ignatius parish in Winnipeg, Manitoba, under the supervision of John English, I participated in a process of learning how to lead others through the exercises.³ As I was learning to lead I reentered the process and again was profoundly moved in my encounters with Jesus Christ.

Why would twenty-first-century Christians use spiritual practices with roots in the sixteenth century? Why would Mennonites explore this approach to deepening faith that is rooted in Catholicism? Perhaps because like Anabaptism, which originated in northern Europe in the same century, the reform movement that began with St. Ignatius in southern Europe also sought to increase believers' faithfulness in following Jesus, to integrate faith and practice, belief with living.

I believe these spiritual exercises have relevance for Mennonites in three specific ways. First, they constitute a spiritual

formation process that is congruent with some core Mennonite beliefs. Second, they are valuable for individuals in their personal spiritual growth. Third, this process could begin to set a framework for a Mennonite spiritual formation process.

Congruence with Mennonite beliefs

Four emphases of *The Spiritual Exercises* are congruent with central Anabaptist/Mennonite themes: focus on Jesus, yieldedness to God, the call to discipleship, and the use of Scripture.

One of Menno Simons's favorite verses was 1 Corinthians 3:11: "For no one can lay any other foundation than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ." *The Spiritual Exercises* also highlight the life and ministry of Jesus. Ignatius sought to know Jesus, and to experience his call personally, as an adult. "Jesus was the way to God for Ignatius."⁴ If one spends ten months using *The Spiritual Exercises*, six will be spent praying directly with Scripture texts from the life and ministry of Jesus.

The Anabaptists advocated *Gelassenheit*, a decision of the will to give up control to the Spirit of God. For them, yieldedness entailed a total commitment to Christ and to the body of Christ on earth; they believed that "spiritual 'yielding' should be made visible in a 'yielding' of possession of material things."⁵ Yieldedness was also important to Ignatius, who held that "our only desire and our one choice should be this: I want and I choose what better leads to God's deepening life in me."⁶

The text of the early Anabaptist hymn "Who now would follow Christ" (1564) captures the Anabaptists' stress on discipleship, the call to follow Christ even to death. In their view, discipleship involved following Christ even if one must forsake family. It was also expressed in sharing economic resources.⁷ The second week of Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises* emphasizes the call to follow Jesus. The starting points for prayer are Gospel texts in which Jesus calls his disciples to follow him. Each person prays for this grace: "I ask Jesus our Lord that I might not be deaf to his call in my life and that I might be ready and willing to do what he wants."⁸ One seeks to follow Jesus' call, unencumbered by desire for anything or anyone else.

The Reformation emphasized the importance of reading and understanding the Scriptures. The Anabaptists believed that

ordinary people who had received the Holy Spirit could interpret Scripture as reliably as did the learned doctors of the church.⁹ Although the exercises as originally conceived by Ignatius included only minimal use of Scripture, modifications since Vatican II include carefully chosen Scripture passages as guides for prayer. As I have been taught the exercises, Scripture is central in all prayer times.

Some differences between Mennonite and Roman Catholic beliefs may need to be addressed in the process of doing of the exercises, including the role of Mary as an intercessor in prayer, the role of the saints, the importance of penance, and the use of body position in prayer. Areas in which Mennonites could add to the Ignatian model are in using music in prayer, and in seeking the active leading of the Holy Spirit.

A valuable tool for individual spiritual growth

The Spiritual Exercises are an excellent tool for prayer and spiritual growth. Who should be encouraged to use them? The process is for those who want their faith to grow. It involves commitment of time, willingness to be open to God, readiness to risk and to try new ways of praying. Candidates should know what the exercises are about and be prepared to work spiritually and emotionally. Those who are experiencing trauma or depression may not have the stamina to participate fully; director and participant need to exercise good judgment about the right time to do the exercises.

The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius could be offered to seminary students as part of their discernment about ministry. The weeks of preparation focus on the love of God, and the knowledge and acceptance of the self as a creature created by God. Knowing God loves you unconditionally is imperative as a starting point for ministry. The first week, on sin, provides opportunity for being accountable for sinfulness, and for healing and reconciliation. The second week is praying with the life and ministry of Jesus and making a decision about how to follow him. The third and fourth weeks test and confirm the call to ministry. This process could be helpful for students preparing for ministry or regrouping in the midst of ministry.

Although individuals do the exercises, the process is not experienced in isolation. The spiritual director is an important

link to the broader faith community. The call to follow Jesus is lived out in the context of a community.

Church leaders familiar with the exercises could apply the principles of the process in working with a congregation. For example, in the prayers of the church, pastors could articulate ways their congregations desire to grow in faith. Often we offer praise, confess sins, and ask for what we need. Less frequently do prayers ask for spiritual growth. Reflecting on how God has helped us grow more into the likeness of Christ or in our desire to follow him can help members consider their growth as individuals and as a group.

A Mennonite spiritual formation process?

Whenever we set out to write a new catechism or baptismal preparation manual we need to consider our goals. What are we trying to grow? Christians? What does a mature Mennonite Christian act like? What is a church leader trying to accomplish when given the task of helping form “good Christians”? What are the tools and guidelines to be used in the process? Is agreement with all the contents of *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* the mark of a mature Christian?

As a church, we have given attention to faith formation in home, church, church school, small groups, and through service. We know that individuals and households are to take responsibility to study the Bible, pray, care for their bodies and the earth. What is our Mennonite understanding of youth and adult faith formation in the congregation? How do we continue to help each other nurture our faith? Can we identify signposts along the way that will aid us as brothers and sisters and as church leaders in guiding people in their spiritual growth?

The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius are potentially a valuable tool for use by individuals and congregations as we seek to deepen our faith. What could we glean from this process and use in the Mennonite church? Might these exercises help us articulate a Mennonite process of spiritual formation? They include some practical skills in prayer and use of Scripture, accountability, and connection to the broader community. They invite us to know God’s deep love for us, to confess our sins, to hear the call to follow Jesus Christ, to undergo testing in adversity, and to walk

freely in the joy of the resurrection. As Christian leaders in the global church, let us use these tools as we respond to the challenge to teach our people to be more faithful followers of Jesus Christ. May God help us.

Notes

¹ David Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality* (Maryknoll: Orbis Bks., 2000), 8–29, offers insights into the world view and social structure of St. Ignatius’s time, as well as information about the images he used.

² Jacqueline Syrup Bergan and Marie Schwan’s *Take and Receive Series*, published by St. Mary’s Press of Winona, Minn., includes these books: *Love, Forgiveness, Birth, Surrender, and Freedom*. It uses modern language and transforms a thirty-day exercise into a thirty-week program.

³ See John J. English, *Spiritual Freedom—From an Experience of the Ignatian Exercises to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Chicago: Loyola Univ. Pr., 1995).

⁴ Lonsdale, *Eyes to See*, 35.

⁵ C. Arnold Snyder, *From Anabaptist Seed: The Historical Core of Anabaptist-Related Identity* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Pr., 1999), 40.

⁶ David L. Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading of The Spiritual Exercises* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 27. According to the Principle and Foundation with which Ignatius begins the first week of the exercises, “For this it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things in all that is allowed to the choice of our free will and is not prohibited to it; so that, on our part, we want not health rather than sickness, riches rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, long rather than short life, and so in all the rest, desiring and choosing only what is most conducive for the use to the end for which we are created.”

⁷ The Hutterites have had a common purse for centuries, and Augsburg Anabaptists were punished for their mutual aid; see “Anabaptist Women Leaders in Augsburg,” in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers*, ed. C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Pr., 1996), 82–105.

⁸ Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship*, 83.

⁹ Snyder, *From Anabaptist Seed*, 12–13.

About the author

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