

**Presentation on third week of the Spiritual Exercises
by Trish Collier
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Today we are going to look at the third week of the spiritual exercises. Some of you will have done a 30 day retreat, some have done the exercises in daily life. I know that many of you did the exercises for New Story of Universal communion in your CLC group last year and some of you won't know much about the exercises at all. So let's take a quick look at where we've come from to give us a context.

When people begin the se (usually with a spiritual director) they usually start with what are called Disposition days – we dispose ourselves to the love of God. We deepen our trust in God and his faithfulness to us. We reflect on how we are being constantly created by God and how God continues to call us by name. We come to believe in the unconditional love of God In the Principle and Foundation we acknowledge that we are created to share God's life forever and that all other created things help us to know God more easily and love Him more readily. We hold ourselves indifferent to all things as ALL things have the potential to call us to a more loving response to God.

Then we move on to the 1st week. In this week we look at sin – personal, corporate and cultural and cosmic - and mercy. We acknowledge our sinfulness – our lack of response to God's love - but know that though we are sinners, we are still loved by our merciful God

In the Second week of the exercises we look at the life of Jesus and come to know and love him as a person in all his humanity. We do this through contemplating his life through scripture, and we grow to love him more and wish to imitate him (The grace we pray for in the 2nd week is to see him more clearly, love him more dearly and follow him more nearly Day by day as the song says). Through meditations such as the Kingdom and the Two Standards we reach a point of decision or Election as Ignatius calls it. This is a choice or decision about how God is calling me at this time in my life. (Just an aside here – I think this is what Jesus did in the desert after His baptism by John .)

This leads us into the third week.

The third week is a very sacred week It is a week about compassion, about confirmation of our election or choice (and Ignatius throws in some Rules for eating about which I'll say a little later)

I think it's worthwhile to speak briefly about the format of the exercises. Each exercise starts with a PREPARATION– we bring our selves in reverence before God asking that everything in our day be directed to His service and praise. Then we pray for the GRACE we desire in that period of prayer. Ignatius suggests a specific Grace for each exercise. Next we look at the Setting or contex. The COMPOSITION OF PLACE AS Ignatius calls it.This helps us to enter into the contemplation as fully as we can. Then we have the material for prayer - the PRAYER TEXT– a scripture passage or meditation such as the Kingdom meditation. After the meditation or contemplation we have a COLLOQUY – an intimate conversation with Jesus, or Mary or the Father where one speaks and listens as though to a lover or friend This

can be any time within the prayer but is normally at the end. The prayer period usually concludes with the Our Father. After the prayer period we do a REVIEW OF PRAYER where we journal about what touched us in the experience.

Prayer in this third week is on the Passion. It covers the last Supper, the agony in the garden, Jesus' arrest and trial, the way of the cross and the crucifixion. Ignatius suggests that persons praying the third week should try to maintain a certain attitude of solemnity congruent with the prayer material. Ignatius focuses very much on the humanity of Jesus and asks us to reflect on how the divinity hides itself.

The grace that we pray for in the third week is - for the gift of sorrow, compassion, and confusion. Sorrow - which is the interior experience of brokenness in all of us, NOT sadness which tends to focus on the self. Compassion - being helpless with Jesus in his helplessness, entering into the loneliness, interior pain of rejection and hatred and all the anguish of Jesus. Confusion - I do not know how to respond. What do you say to a friend who is about to die?

Jesuit John Veltri says we are praying to be united with Christ in his passion. It is blending the sufferings of our lives, the on-going passion of the Body of Christ i.e. Christ's suffering in the exploited and marginalized in our world today, AND the sufferings of Christ in his passion together.

When we look at the setting for prayer in the third week we bring to mind the narrative we intend to contemplate. At the Last Supper we might recall that Jesus and his friends were celebrating the Passover bearing witness to God's mercy to the Israelites of old, how Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and how he offered himself to all without reserve even though one would betray him, all would abandon him and one would deny him.

When looking at the scripture to be contemplated we apply our senses to enter as fully into the scene as possible. We allow our bodily senses to take in the sights, sounds, tastes, smells and feelings. We see the people in the scene. Who is there? What are they doing? Where am I? We hear what is being said. Who is talking? What are they talking about? Are they addressing me? I attempt to get beyond the externals and enter into the loneliness, rejection and anguish of Jesus.

When we pray with the passion we are often confronted with the suffering in our own lives. My mother has been in a nursing home for 6 years. She is in bed all day and is disinterested in the world. I visit her three times a week. Sometimes it is very difficult to be with her. Sometimes she does not wish to engage in conversation and although she does not have alzheimers she is often forgetful. This is living the third week. My friends with intellectual disabilities, whom I've met through L'Arche, are often frustrated, as I am, at my inability to understand them. We live the third week together. Many of you experience in your own lives the powerlessness of living with mental or chronic illness, or have experienced the loneliness or rejection of the refugee or indigenous Australian. This is the body of Christ still suffering in our world.

The third week can be a difficult time for prayer. Our prayer may feel dry or barren. Prayer at this time is about letting go of the self to be in unity with Christ, and in the de-centering which occurs we may experience a profound darkness. (Re-reading my own journal entry for the Text My God, My God I wrote "...the only comfort you

seek is from the father, but none comes. Every day for 7 months I pray to know you, love you and serve you more. Today I face the great void – the black hole, the nothing. My God, My God why have you forsaken me?”) We may find we cannot use our imagination and are unusually distracted, or that Jesus is distant. We are called to console Jesus – not to feel good or consoled ourselves-- It is like being by the bed of a loved one who is dying – we stay there and watch focussed only on the other Or it is like the compassion of a child confronted by the sorrow of a parent – he doesn’t understand her pain but stops playing and goes to her and just being there gives her comfort. (I remember being at my in-laws when an uncle died and his wife came to be with my mother in-law. I wanted to take the children away so that they wouldn’t worry the aunty but when I looked my child was just sitting quietly on aunty’s knee)

Sometimes all we experience may be an increase in faith, hope and love or consolation as Ignatius calls it, as our WILL rather than our FEELINGS is attached to God. Once again –think of when we visit a terminally ill friend or relative. We may not want to go, it may be a very difficult experience but we WILL ourselves to visit because we want the ill person to know we care. Through these experiences we meet the God of consolations rather than the consolations of God.

On the other hand we may deepen our experience of intimacy with Jesus through the application of the senses where we really taste the anguish of Jesus or touch the place where he prayed and we may feel overwhelmed. I think Mel Gibson used this approach in the Passion of the Christ. Interestingly, Jesuit Monty Williams says that the gospel writers are fairly discrete in their accounts of the Passion. He describes it ‘...like a lover who is aware but unwilling to depict the beloved’s final anguish’ However our own contemplation may help us to be there for Jesus in his suffering. It is important to remember that the main focus of our prayer in the third week is to console a very human Jesus and not to seek consolation ourselves.

In the background as we contemplate the passion is our desire for confirmation of an election or choice that we may have tentatively made in the second week of the exercises. In this week a person seeking confirmation is encouraged to look at some of the practical implications of their decision and to consider more specific details. Eg A person wishing to live more authentically may need to consider the cost of bringing up for discussion topics previously swept under the carpet or A person looking to simplify his lifestyle could discuss with family members ideas such as a smaller house, moving to one car or simpler holidays as part of seeking confirmation and looking at what the cost of discipleship would mean in his daily life Michael Ivens s.j. says that confirmation is not about verifying our choice or election but about strengthening the chooser. A person is confirmed in the election to the extent that she can say YES to the dying and rising with Christ that WILL come with following Him. As we look at what living in unity with the father cost Jesus, it is an appropriate time to consider the cost of our own discipleship.

We can never get 100% certainty that our decision will prove successful or will never need to be re-considered in the light of new information but what we hope for is as Veltri sj says “a loving moral assurance” that the decision was well made. – A sense of peace and a quiet growth in trust

Also within the third week Ignatius discusses some Rules for eating.

He says “One should consider carefully what would be helpful and therefore to be permitted and what would be harmful and to be avoided.” He suggests a simple attitude to eating and drinking with a daily consistent discipline.

When considering the rules for eating we also need to consider our use of painkillers? And not just drugs. We use alcohol, cigarettes, TV, shopping, busyness and sleep among other things to tranquillize ourselves to avoid facing the realities of our lives. It is important to be conscious of our use of these and how this impacts on our response to follow Christ totally.

So to recap the third week. We’ve looked for the confirmation of our election, looked at the rules for eating but most importantly we have prayed with the passion. In the third week Jesus is seen most clearly in all his humanity and we are called to the experience of compassion – to suffer with him in his passion. Can we also stand with Jesus in the sufferings of the body of Christ in those who are currently betrayed, rejected or denied? Can we allow Jesus and others to stand beside us in our suffering? What cost are we willing to pay for discipleship?

In putting together these thoughts I have drawn on the writings of the following Jesuits – Fleming, Veltri, Williams and Ivens.