

Having made the decision to take a sabbatical and faced the demanding task of making the necessary arrangements for cover I opted to focus on doing a 30 day retreat, the full Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola and am very grateful for a grant from Sion College to help pay for this. Some years ago I had done an 8 day retreat at St Beuno's and found it very helpful. I have drawn on that experience ever since, so I felt drawn to do the full 30 Days.

I knew this would be challenging and it certainly was. The Exercises are based on Ignatius' own experience, which he then used and modified with other people. I was one of 5 people doing the Exercises at Loyola Hall, a Retreat and Spirituality Centre near Liverpool. After an initial couple of days of workshops the retreat itself began and we went into silence. The basic structure is that each day I saw my assigned spiritual director for a one-to-one session and in the course of each day, in my own time, had 4 one hour sessions of silent prayer and meditation. The theme and subject matter was given by the director. Before each session there was a time of preparation and after it a time of reflection. At the very beginning we looked at Ignatius' First Principle and Foundation: 'that we are created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord.' It follows from this that everything else is secondary; that as 'as far as we are concerned we should not want health more than illness, wealth more than poverty, fame more than disgrace, a long life than a short one... but should choose and desire only what helps us more towards the end for which we are created.' Ignatius was definitely not a woolly liberal!

A key element in the Exercises is to reflect deeply on what is happening for us at the deepest level – where are the points of consolation and desolation because these can help us to see where God's Spirit is leading us. This was then shared in the meeting with the director. Mine was a Catholic lay woman who was extremely skilled. She had a way of really helping me to engage at a deep level. One of her favourite words after I had spoken or shared a picture I had done was simply to say 'And.....?'

Each day is made up of the four prayer periods, the meeting with the director and the daily eucharist. In the afternoon there was a space of 2-3 hours. Sometimes I used this for doing art work to express what was emerging from my prayer. On other days I explored the local area. This was the daily routine and interestingly it was no different on Sunday. In fact sometimes it was hard to remember which day it was.

The house itself is geared to supporting those on retreat, whether they come for the 30 Days or for shorter retreats and I felt supported by the prayers of the community.

The Exercises are divided into 4 weeks – but these weeks were not necessarily 7 days – in fact none of them were. Week one deals with sin and the human condition. Week two looks at the incarnation and life of Jesus. Week three goes through the passion and week four looks at the resurrection. In between each week is a Day of Repose. On these days we were out of silence between 10am and the 6pm eucharist. These were the only days we could phone home or buy a newspaper. It made me realise how addicted I am to my daily fix of newsprint. Finally after the 30 Days were complete we were able to talk with each other and we all went for lunch together.

Overall it feels a bit like a spiritual commando course which takes you deep into your core faith and commitment and challenges you to engage with God and commit to God on a far deeper level. There is a lot to process and I feel this will be an on-going task for a long time to come.

Anyone interested in doing the 30 Days Retreat is welcome to contact me to talk about it.

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