



A Spirituality of the Heart

By David L. Fleming, SJ

*The following is an excerpt from the book *What is Ignatian Spirituality?* by David L. Fleming, SJ. He discusses the “heart” of the *Spiritual Exercises*, which are a compilation of meditations, prayers, and contemplative practices developed by St. Ignatius Loyola to help people deepen their relationship with God. The original text of this article is found here: www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/a-spirituality-of-the-heart/*

Ignatius prefaced his *Spiritual Exercises* with twenty notes that explain the purpose of his exercises and offer advice and counsel to the director who is guiding the retreat. The very first of these “preliminary helps” explains what he means by *spiritual* exercises. Physical exercise tunes up the body and promotes good health. Spiritual exercise, he writes, is good for “strengthening and supporting us in the effort to respond ever more faithfully to the love of God.”

Note what Ignatius did not say. He did not say that the *Spiritual Exercises* are designed primarily to deepen our understanding or to strengthen our will. He did not promise to explain spiritual mysteries to us or enlighten our minds. We may emerge from the Exercises with enhanced intellectual understanding, but this is not the goal. The goal is a response—a certain kind of response. Ignatius is after a response of the heart.

“Heart” does not mean the emotions (though it includes our emotions). It refers to our inner orientation, the core of our being. This kind of “heart” is what Jesus was referring to when he told us to store up treasures in heaven instead of on earth, “for where your treasure is, there also will your heart be” (Matthew 6:21). This is the “heart” Jesus was worried about when he said “from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, unchastity, theft, false witness, blasphemy” (Matthew 15:19). Jesus observed that our heart can get untethered from our actions: “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Matthew 15:8). Heart in this sense—the totality of our response—is the concern of the *Spiritual Exercises*.

This is the ancient meaning of “heart” in biblical usage, but we actually retain traces of this meaning in contemporary English. When we say to someone “my heart goes out to you,” we mean something more than a feeling of concern. If said sincerely, it communicates a sense of solidarity with someone. It means more than “I understand” (our intellect). It means more than “I sympathize” (our feelings). It means something like, “I stand with you in this.” It is an expression of a fundamental choice.

Today we commonly say about someone who shows no enthusiasm for a project that “his heart isn’t in it.” We usually say this when people behave in a way that is at odds with their deepest desires. We say it about ourselves when we hurt people that we love and do things that we know are at odds with who we really are. This “heart” is what Ignatius is concerned with. We might think about Ignatian spirituality as a way of getting our hearts in the right place.

Ignatius understood this because that is what happened to him. He underwent a profound conversion while recuperating from his wounds, but it was not a conversion of the intellect or will. Before his conversion—and afterward—he was a thoroughly orthodox Catholic who followed the religious practices expected of him. That was not what changed. His conversion involved his deepest desires and commitments, that essential center of the personality in which a human stands before God. His religious practice and intellectual understanding deepened over time, but it was his heart that was transformed.

Over years of prayerful reflection and spiritual direction of others, Ignatius developed many ways to listen to the language of the heart. This is the language that reveals God's intentions and inspires us to a generous response. What we believe and what we do are important. But Ignatius is far more interested in the condition of our hearts. Still, most of us face a persistent temptation to make the Spiritual Exercises or any kind of spiritual renewal a matter of changing the way we think. Indeed, this danger arises even in a book like this, which sets forth ideas and concepts and principles to broaden our understanding of Ignatian spirituality. It is vital to realize that understanding is not the goal. We can understand a great number of things, but this may not affect the way we live our lives. The goal is a response of the heart, which truly changes the whole person.

God taught Ignatius about the heart through several mystical visions he received early in his spiritual formation. One such vision came upon him at a time when he was questioning whether he should say three or four prayers to our Trinitarian God—a prayer directed to each Person, Father, Son, and Spirit, and then a fourth prayer to the One God. He was praying outside on the steps of a monastery when he suddenly “heard” God the Trinity as the musical sound of three organ keys playing simultaneously. Another time he received a vision of God the creator as “something white out of which rays were coming.” Out of this whiteness God created light. “He did not know how to explain these things,” he writes of himself in the third person. But Ignatius responded with his heart: “This was accompanied with so much tears and so much sobbing that he could not restrain himself.”

This heart response is a cornerstone of the Spiritual Exercises. Creation is a flow of God's gifts, with a human response being the link that allows the flow to return to God. The human response is a free choice to allow God's creation to speak. Creation helps us to know and love God and to want to live with God forever.

Early in the Exercises, Ignatius asks the retreatant to pray before Jesus Christ on the cross. He identifies Christ as creator, the God of the Principle and Foundation. “Talk to him about how he creates because he loves,” Ignatius seems to say. This is no abstract God of reason, but a loving God seen in the face of Jesus Christ. It is the Pauline Christ of Colossians and Ephesians. It is the Christ of the Prologue to John's Gospel: the Word “in whom all things were created.” This is the Son of God, the Alpha and Omega of John's Apocalypse.

Our spiritual journey is an attempt to answer the question, “What is life all about?” Here is Ignatius's answer: a vision of God for our hearts, not our minds. It is a depiction of the Creator as a superabundant giver. He gives gifts that call forth a response on our part, a free choice to return ourselves to him in grateful thanks and love. It is a vision that only a heart can respond to.