



STUDIES

IN
THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS

Mind and Heart

*Towards an Ignatian Spirituality
of Study*

NICHOLAS AUSTIN, S.J.

THE SEMINAR ON JESUIT SPIRITUALITY

The Seminar is composed of a number of Jesuits appointed from their provinces in the United States.

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the first word . . .

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. (Great opening line that, even if it's not completely original to me.) The subsequent lines aren't bad either.

It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity,
it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness,
it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.

What on earth brought the epigraph of *The Tale of Two Cities* to mind after all these years? In this issue Nick Austin invites his readers to reflect on the life of studies that forms such a large part of every Jesuit's vocation. Looking back over the many years since my own period of "training" ended, I was struck by the realization that the life was (at least for me) one of paradox and balance, much like the polarities Dickens's epigraph captures. In fact, it fits so perfectly in each of its contradictions that he might have been drafting a report for province formation directors.

Surely, mine is not a unique observation, nor even a minority opinion. After all, Jesuits sit in a classroom for many, many years, sixteen in my case, covering everything from Xenophon in the novitiate, to Rahner in theology, to Ingmar Bergman in graduate school. How could such a span of time not have its crests and troughs? Some subjects made me as happy as a pig in a five-star sty, others like a daily trip to the abattoir. Some professors were truly inspiring, others best left to legendary obituary writers of *Letters and Notices*. As the years of study slip past, the perennial pull of the pastoral inevitably surfaces from time to time: with so many needs in the Church and society, why am I still sitting here writing papers and taking tests on subjects that will have little application to my life in "the real world"? Well into our thirties, we faced the prospect of continual evaluation by others: vows, ordination, comps, dissertation defense, hiring interviews. During the same time, classmates from college or high school have married and become lawyers, physicians, and corporate managers; we got a fixed weekly allotment for personal expenses from the community treasurer. How could one not be victim to dark thoughts on occasion, even in the midst of life that was basically quite satisfying?

What got us through the down periods? Here's where experience probably varies widely across several generational divides. Surely many of my contemporaries were and are very holy men, as were many of our superiors and professors. The difference is that spirituality was an absolutely private matter. Talking about it simply was not done. If a rich prayer life provided support during times of temptation and doubt, no one would dare speak about it. Spiritual direction was minimal, where it existed at all, and the individually directed retreat a practical impossibility with the numbers of scholastics we had. No one used the term "faith sharing." The very concept would have been considered indecent, or at least inappropriate. No doubt we drew nourishment from the daily Eucharist, but although we gathered together every morning to follow the Latin Mass from our missals, there was little conscious effort in forming a communion of prayer: no homily, no song, no common responses or prayer of the faithful.

Yet, oddly enough, I have grown more convinced that community provided the support that got us through the various "winters of despair." We had classmates and friends in numbers beyond the imagining of scholastics and students today. It was a mixed blessing. A few precisions should nuance both those assertions. Large numbers entered the novitiate each year. That much is clear. Yet, even with the numbers, we found little variation in background. The overwhelming majority came from Catholic, church-going families, attended parochial schools, and graduated from Jesuit high schools. The smattering of college men had for the most part attended Jesuit colleges. Very few of us had seen military service or engaged in a profession or business. No one had been married, and although statistically some among that number must have been gay, it was a topic that we never mentioned. Therefore, we were overwhelmingly white, urban, smart, and from somewhere in that highly elastic category of middle class.

The homogeneity of the group of "people just like us" provided an enormous cushion of support as we marched lock-step through the various stages of studies. It was in many ways a very comfortable brand of companionship. This may sound like a purely sociological observation, but it has a spiritual dimension as well. The sameness provided a shared-value system and set of goals. We complained to one another, of course, but not to the extent of questioning "the system" that had worked so effectively for so many years. It gave a strong sense of corporate identity within the Society and thus a personal appropriation of the Society's apostolic goals. We had the luxury of certainty that we fit into a divine plan, and that gave a sense of security that enabled us to support one another. Talking about the interior life or sharing doubts about the Society's mission didn't fit into the conversation, simply because it was unnecessary. We knew, as if by intuition, what others were thinking; and because they came from similar backgrounds and lived year after year through the identical educational program, we were probably correct, at least for the most

part. At the end of studies, we would be doing what American Jesuits have always done. Preparing to serve the external ministry was far more productive than examining the interior life of the minister-to-be. And if we were to try to quantify the allotment of time and effort between these apparently compartmentalized areas of Jesuit life, it's clear which segment consumed the bulk of our attention and energy.

Of course, as history has shown over the past few decades, the uniformity that supported us also had its limitations. It was poor preparation for the multicultural and internationally interconnected Society that quickly developed around us. It made it just that much harder to think in new patterns, to abandon—perhaps with some regret—what American Jesuits have always done, to assume new, untested ventures, and to collaborate with colleagues distinctly not just like us. Let's not try to simplify an enormously complicated phenomenon; but when I think of the extraordinary number of departures from the Society during the years of transition, I can't help thinking our "sameness" contributed to the exodus. We had built a house of cards, with each uniformly sized and weighted individual card supporting the whole. When the social upheaval came—obviously Vatican II and GC 32 for us—the entire edifice became unstable. The departure of a few excellent men led to the departure of a few more, and so on. Without the support of structures and friends that had provided stability to our world, the situation for many fine men became simply untenable. Gallows humor had a bite to it: deck chairs on the *Titanic*; last one out, turn off the lights; and so on. Relentlessly.

Our men in studies today surely have their own challenges to address, and it would be unfair to trivialize their difficulties. Community life and religious vocation have never been for the faint of heart. At the same time, it seems fair to surmise that they have a much better set of tools to deal with them. From the first day of the novitiate, they join into companionship in the Lord with men very different from themselves. They have varied educational and professional backgrounds, and most probably some will have come from cities far from the boundaries of the home province. Spiritual direction and faith sharing form important elements of their formation from the start of their religious life. They grow up learning to reflect upon their experience and articulate their ideas and feelings as a simple part of the rhythm of life in community. Personally appropriated commitment to a call is far more important than fitting in to the routine. Experiments and pilgrimages widen their understanding of the work of the Church and Society. First studies on a university campus provides an international dimension to their world. In the intercultural mix, they learn how to navigate through life with people having very different perspectives on everything from ideology and devotional practices, to work assignments and cuisine. The set patterns just don't exist. It can't be easy for them.

Availability for mission in a diverse Society has become a far-more-demanding form of asceticism for students than it was in times past. Studies involve a total commitment without guarantees, and this demands a heroic act of faith. The Society continues to change: ministries and even provinces evolve at a seemingly accelerating rate. In admissions sessions for prospective freshmen, I try to point out the folly of regarding a liberal-arts college as a preparation for a specific job, since the job they anticipate may not exist when they enter the work force, and the job they will spend the bulk of the lives pursuing possibly does not exist at present. Choosing a liberal-arts college is an act of faith in the future and in themselves. The uncertainty of the future burdens Jesuit students even more heavily, since the Jesuit's religious life and ministry form two sides of the same coin. It's not merely a job.

This test of faith affects doctoral students most deeply. At least in the American context, academic disciplines have become so specialized that superiors can no longer simply assign a Jesuit to a faculty. The anxiety of finishing the dissertation gives way first to the job hunting with credentials "that don't quite fit our needs" at an age when many of their contemporaries within the department have already achieved seniority. After successful placement, the tenure process begins, only to be followed by the challenge of promotion through research and publication. Outsiders may view this progress as an exercise in academic vanity, but as Father General noted in his recent letter on the intellectual apostolate, "As professors in universities . . . they participate fully in the life of their institutes or faculties. These Jesuits involved in the "ministry of teaching" are, or should also be, involved in the "ministry of research." In the context of Nick's reflections in this essay, it's clear that a deep spiritual self-awareness is absolutely essential for anyone preparing to make a contribution to this "ministry of research."

While many of these issues did not exist for most Jesuits of my vintage, one seems to have spanned all the generations of students: What am I doing here? In the old days, the answer was simple: it's always been done this way. Today, that's not enough. We need, corporately and individually, the confidence that we know what we're doing and why. A student has to be convinced that what he's doing matters for his future apostolate and for his own spiritual growth. Compartmentalizing won't do. Study enriches the spiritual life and prayer enhances study because both together animate one's engagement in the mission of Jesus among his people. Both combine to make the minister a more effective instrument for the apostolate.

This conclusion seems simple, but the conviction that it is true does not come easily in every instance. An example or two may help. Obviously, studying pastoral counseling, homiletics, or liturgy in a prayerful context can be taken for granted as part of one's preparation for parish work. Doing a course in metaphysical poetry as part of a doctoral program leading to a university appointment in English literature might seem a stretch, even though prayer

might help one appreciate the rich spirituality in the works of Donne or Herbert. Economics, political science, sociology, or business may take more effort still, but at least they can be considered in the context of the Society's mission of furthering social justice. To an outsider like me, the physical sciences seem to offer even more of a challenge to integration, even though Teilhard de Chardin found great spiritual riches in his scientific work. All I wish to suggest is that students, working in different areas, have different avenues to achieve a wholeness in their spiritual and intellectual lives, but no one is exempt from making the journey.

And what of those of us who have finished formal studies? Is it possible for a Jesuit ever to finish studies? The way of research and discovery forms the essential rhythm of Jesuit life regardless of one's apostolate. One can always find better ways of proceeding, no matter what ministry we pursue. The danger of allowing professional competence to become an end in itself threatens all of us. Knowledge and skills proximately serve the apostolate and ultimately open the way to discovery of God in all things, especially our own lives. That's where the thoughtful essay that Nick has provided for us proves so helpful. Fresh from doctoral studies and tertianship himself, and currently teaching Jesuit theology students in London, Nick clearly builds his reflection on his experiences of student life and directs his remarks to those currently engaged in studies. Don't be deceived. The theoretical background he provides in the first part can help all of us, regardless of age or assignment, break down conceptual boundaries between our work and our prayer. He ends with practical suggestions that anyone can adapt to his own work. I hope you will find his essay as illuminating as the members of the Seminar did. We enjoyed it. I'm sure our readers will as well.

Richard A. Blake, S.J.

Editor

CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION: STUDIES AND DEVOTION	1
Experience	5
Practice	8
A Delicate Balance	12
Some Questions	15
II. A TWOFOLD EXAMEN.	17
The Examen of Experience	17
The Examen of Practice	21
III. THE SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE OF STUDY	26
IV. THE SPIRITUAL PRACTICE OF STUDY	31
Attentiveness within Study	33
Establishing a Personal Ordo	34
V. THE STUDENT'S EXAMEN.	36
VI. CONCLUSION: DEVOTION IN STUDY	38

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MIND AND HEART

Towards an Ignatian Spirituality of Study

Integrating study and spirituality can prove challenging for Jesuits of any age bracket. By exploring the Ignatian tradition from the perspective of experience, practice, and examen, and drawing from resources in contemporary spirituality, theological ethics, and positive psychology, this essay suggests a way to achieve a cohesive unity in the lives of Jesuit students.

I. Introduction

I first became interested in the spirituality of studies when, during my doctoral studies, a Jesuit friend told me, “The greatest challenge in writing a dissertation is not the intellectual, but the spiritual challenge.” In fact, it was only when I was in my final year of writing that I began to talk to my spiritual director about my study. The irony here has only gradually dawned on me. I had been a Jesuit for fourteen years; my main mission for ten of them had been to study. Yet it had taken me that long to begin to take the predominant activity of my Jesuit life seriously enough as a spiritual experience to bring it to my spiritual director. This failure was no less absurd than if a pastor were consistently to neglect to bring his experience of ministry to his meetings with his spiritual guide, as though God can be found only in prayer. Hardly an Ignatian approach.

I do not think I am alone in this. It is obvious even to a casual observer that the Society of Jesus places immense value on academic pursuits; it also has a rich spiritual tradition. Yet these two aspects of Jesuit life do not always seem well integrated in a spirituality of study itself. It is almost as though the message inadvertently given is that one can find God in all things, except study.

Indeed, in our houses of philosophy and theology, supposed truisms sometimes circulate that undermine the sense that studies and the spiritual life can grow together. First and most frequently, one hears that the two are not complementary but rather antithetical. I once heard a senior Jesuit advise that the spiritual task in studies is to keep the flame of one's spiritual life from going out completely, so that it can be fully ignited afterwards with priestly ministry. This is scarcely a high ideal for those hoping to deepen their love of God through studies! And many do find that spending long hours in the library dries up the emotional life, something Ignatius himself observes.¹

Second, the history and documents of the Society of Jesus speak eloquently of the apostolic purpose of our studies. Ignatius, having been expelled from Jerusalem, decided to study precisely "in order to be able to help souls."² As the Constitutions themselves state, "The end of the learning which is acquired in this Society is with God's favor to help the souls of its own members and those of their neighbors."³ The apostolic goal of studies can be a motivation for the Jesuit student; yet the bad spirit can introduce subtle false reasonings from this foundational premise. The statement that Jesuit studies are always for the sake of the apostolate and, as it is often also put, never an end in themselves can easily slide into a distorted attitude that instrumentalizes studies, seeing them as a hurdle to be jumped before the real work of ministry begins.

¹Ignatius writes to the rector of the college at Salamanca: "Moreover, the occupation of the mind with academic pursuits naturally tends to produce a certain dryness in the interior affections," in *Saint Ignatius of Loyola, Personal Writings: Reminiscences, Spiritual Diary, Select Letters Including the Text of the Spiritual Exercises*, translated by Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 494.

²*Ibid.*, 35.

³*The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms: A Complete English Translation of the Official Latin Texts* (Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), [351]. Hereafter this source will be abbreviated to CN.

And third, there is even occasionally an unfortunate tendency to separate Jesuits into two kinds: those who are scholars and have the natural tendency to enjoy studies (but who are not very good pastorally) and those who are more pastorally inclined (but who inevitably find studies difficult).

Together, these not uncommon assumptions convey a picture of Jesuit studies as antiritual, purely instrumental, and, at best, suited only to a few. Yet, as is often the case when the thoughts that lead to desolation are brought into the light of day, they have little to recommend them. Admittedly, some are more academically or pastorally gifted than others. Yet the dichotomy between academic and pastoral Jesuits is hardly helpful

if, as is surely the case, Jesuit life is often at its best when the academic and pastoral mutually inform each other. Furthermore, we need some way of acknowledging the apostolic end of studies while simultaneously seeing

“There is no doubt that is a greater virtue in the soul, and a greater grace, for it to be able to relish its Lord in a variety of duties and in a variety of places, rather than simply in one.”

them as intrinsically valuable, not merely a means to a future end. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach’s way of putting things may help: for a Jesuit student, study is [present tense] his primary mission and apostolate.⁴ Most fundamentally, to claim that studies are antiritual to the spiritual life contradicts what is widely recognized as the central tenet of Ignatian spirituality, that God can be found in all worthwhile occupations.

The idea that studies are antiritual was not one held by Ignatius himself.⁵ Ignatius does tell the students at Coimbra that they do not

⁴*The Formation of Jesuits: From the Letters of Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J.* (Rome: General Curia of the Society of Jesus, 2003), 50.

⁵For two excellent accounts of the spirituality of studies by Ignatian scholars, see Brian O’Leary, *Sent into the Lord’s Vineyard: Explorations in the Jesuit Constitutions* (Oxford, UK: Way Publications, 2012), 69–80; Joseph F. Conwell, *Walking in the Spirit: A Reflection on Jerónimo Nadal’s Phrase “Contemplative Likewise in Action”* (St Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2003), chap. 8. For an interesting discussion of how a Jesuit, more experiential spirituality of studies may differ from a Thomistic one, see Louis Caruana, “Philosophy, Experience and the Spiritual Life,” *Review of Ignatian Spirituality* 38, no. 2 (2007): 40–56

have time for very long prayers. However, he goes on to exhort them to “make all their activities into a continual prayer.”⁶ An Ignatian spirituality of study is therefore not about praying a lot during the period of studies (important though prayer is) but rather finding God in the very act of study itself.

This is confirmed by the letter Ignatius wrote to a second-year novice, none other than Francis Borgia, about his spiritual life.⁷ Borgia has been going to excess in his prayer and penance, and Ignatius advises him to reallocate to study and other activities over half the time he is spending on prayer. To justify this recommendation, Ignatius enunciates the principle: “There is no doubt that is a greater virtue in the soul, and a greater grace, for it to be able to relish its Lord in a variety of duties and in a variety of places, rather than simply in one.”⁸ Study, then, is one of those activities in which Borgia should be looking to “relish the Lord.”

Indeed, Ignatius’s hope for all Jesuit students is that they be “blessed with mortification and meditation and genuine prayer in the studies themselves.”⁹ The challenge, it seems to me, is to make this a realizable ideal. What does finding God in studies look like, in concrete and practical terms, in the life of the Ignatian student?

In order to sketch an Ignatian approach to studies, I begin by outlining a general model of Ignatian spirituality in terms of three overlapping dimensions: experience (spirituality-as-gift), practice (spirituality-as-way), and examen (spirituality-as-navigation). I then show how this framework can be applied to articulate an Ignatian spirituality of study. Given the context in which this essay arose—my own experience of studies in the Society of Jesus and of being a teacher and guide to others in a similar situation—it is natural that I write especially with Jesuits in formation (“Jesuit students,” whether scholastics or brothers) especially in mind. However, my hope is that any Ignatian person, lay or religious, female or male, who recognizes study as an ongoing part of her or his vocation, will be able to find here something of help. I do

⁶Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings*, 181.

⁷*Ibid.*, 204–7.

⁸*Ibid.*, 205.

⁹Quoted in Conwell, *Walking in the Spirit*, 176 (italics added).

not pretend to be able to present a full account of an Ignatian spirituality of studies; in particular, I have taken the apostolic dimension for granted, rather than elaborating upon it, something that is done well elsewhere.¹⁰ Nevertheless, what follows is, I hope, at least the sketch of a practical spirituality that provides a concrete and consoling way of living studies in the Ignatian way.

Experience

In this section and the next, I offer a framework for understanding Ignatian spirituality that I later apply to studies. A spirituality based upon the Spiritual Exercises evidences three dimensions or aspects—spiritual experience, practice, and examen. Let us begin with experience.

However one narrates the renewal of the Ignatian approach to the spiritual life over the last fifty or so years, the rediscovery of the centrality of experience has been paramount. For Jesuits now in their seventies and eighties, the following initiation into religious life seems to have been typical. On the first day following the “first probation” (a period of about two weeks), the eighteen-year-old novice would receive the *Epitome Instituti* (a summary of the important sections in the *Constitutions*), the *De ratione meditandi*, by J. P. Roothan (on the method of prayer to be followed by Jesuits), and Alphonsus Rodriguez’s *Practice of Perfection and Christian Virtues*.¹¹ The impression given by these texts was that Jesuit life was an edifice scaffolded by rules.

Rodriguez (not to be confused with the saint of the same name) was a moral theologian; his *Practice of Perfection*, written in the early-seventeenth century, was an ascetical manual. It consisted in a set of practical counsels about how to grow in the holiness proper to a Jesuit. The wisdom it enshrined was gathered from the writings of the Desert Fathers and from the monastic and scholastic traditions; it was peppered throughout with references to Ignatius. The manual contained treatises on such matters such as how to practice charity toward one’s brothers, how to pray, perform mortification, live the vows, be humble,

¹⁰See especially Father Nicolás’s recent letter to the whole Society of Jesus, *On Jesuits Missioned to the Intellectual Apostolate* (Rome, May 24, 2014).

¹¹ Alfonso Rodríguez, *Practice of Perfection and Christian Virtues*, trans. Joseph Rickaby, 3 vols. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1929).

modest, and silent, what to do when attending Mass, how to manifest one's conscience, and the way to correct one's brothers in charity. An Irish Jesuit told me this was the only spiritual reading permitted in his novitiate, unless a novice was especially advanced, in which case he might in his second year be allowed to read De Caussade or some other

Experience also has an inner dimension of thoughts, feelings, imaginings, and so on. In short, then, experience is what happens to us, exteriorly and, especially, interiorly.

Jesuit spiritual writer. Another Jesuit, from the Netherlands, told me that as novices they were required to read Rodriguez in Dutch, then French, then Latin (it served also as training in languages). He commented that, within a short period of time, he had protested to his novice master

that he found the entire three-volume work crazy; then he was permitted to read the lives of the Jesuit saints instead, a concession to the weakness of his particular temperament. He also wryly noted that he was one of the few novices to survive as a Jesuit, and that for the most part those who found Rodriguez congenial left the Society!

The mode of formation, then, was highly rationalistic, although in practice probably often tempered by the good sense of the novice master. Rodriguez is now criticized for proposing a purely ascetical approach that is not genuinely Ignatian or Jesuit. It is not that "asceticism" as such is a bad word: the term can be used to refer to an element of any serious form of Christian discipleship; namely, the attempt to make progress in the spiritual life through a disciplined engagement in practices of prayer, community, and service. But Rodriguez's asceticism is the kind of thing that weighs down the term with a lot of unwanted baggage. There is little focus on mission, discernment has disappeared for all except the superior, and there is the absence of a sense of prayer as a living relationship with the Lord. The virtues that are proposed are above all those of abnegation: humility, self-control, solitude, and silence. Chastity is the mortification of sexuality rather than its positive integration into the personality and apostolic life, and "particular friendships" are invariably suspect. There is an excessive focus on sin and on questionable penances such as the use of the discipline and hair shirt. Living God's will is not a matter of discerning desires

so much as denying them. While the manual is not without its gems of practical wisdom, what is missing in Rodriguez is above all a reverence for personal experience as a privileged locus in which to discern the action of God within the soul. The result is a lifeless form of asceticism that does not breathe with the Spirit.

There were many factors in the transition from this to the spiritual formation we now have. The broader movements in Church and society played a significant role. However, the primary internal cause of the revolution in Jesuit spirituality was the realization that the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* called for a dialogue between the giver and receiver of the exercises. In particular, the exercitant is asked to manifest his or her prayer experience, often articulated in the language of consolation and desolation. Both director and exercitant are engaged in a process of discerning, through reflection on these spiritual movements, where the bad spirit and Good Spirit are at work, so as to reject the former and follow the latter.

The turn to the richness of interior experience, with a corresponding acknowledgement of the role of emotion and desire, breathed new life into Jesuit spirituality. As the Irish Jesuit Joseph Veale, himself a significant figure in the renewal, puts it in an oft-quoted passage:

It is remarkable what one learns about the ways of God when one spends time each day with one exercitant listening to their experience in prayer, and trying to discern together where it may seem the Spirit is leading. The trim garden paths of the spiritual treatises begin to look unreliable.¹²

The result, then, was nothing less than a paradigm shift.

The new experiential mode of proceeding was arguably closer to the sources. Renewed attention to the "Autobiography" and the "Spiritual Diary," as well as to the text of the Exercises themselves, showed a mystical Ignatius, one who was a master at learning from his spiritual experience and making that knowledge useful to others.¹³

¹²Joseph Veale, *Manifold Gifts: Ignatian Essays on Spirituality* (Oxford, UK: Way Publications, 2006), 139.

¹³See the helpful discussion by Terence O'Reilly, in "Joseph Veale and the History of the Spiritual Exercises," *Milltown Studies* 66 (Winter, 2010): 1–18.

So Ignatian spirituality, as currently practiced, does not focus on the implementation of a timeless ascetical blueprint; rather, it begins with an invitation to spiritual experience and reflection on that experience as the place where God is found to be at work in my life. It is this approach, I think it is fair to say, which has borne such fruit in our formation programs, retreat houses, and general teaching about Ignatian spirituality.

Practice

There is, however, a question that can be raised about this experiential understanding of Ignatian spirituality. For what do we mean by “experience”? As well as an outer dimension, which is constituted by the external impact of other persons, situations, and events upon us, experience also has an inner dimension of thoughts, feelings, imaginings, and so on. In short, then, experience is *what happens to us*, exteriorly and, especially, interiorly.

There is, therefore, a danger as well as a wealth in any experience-centered spirituality. “Experience” is a fundamentally passive category: it is something one undergoes rather than does. So even when we consider the experience of an active subject, the perspective we adopt is *not so much what the agent is doing as what is happening to the acting subject*.

Admittedly, the fact that experience is passive does not mean it is negative. It is because experience is passive, or receptive, that through it we come to a deeper realization that all that is good in our lives is not attained by our own efforts alone, but is something freely given. Thus I may ponder “with deep affection how much God our Lord has done for me, how much he has given me of what he possesses” (*SpEx* 234).¹⁴ This knowledge of God at work in my experience is a deeply personal one. When this experiential knowledge is placed at the center of spirituality it undermines any “one size fits all” approach and leads to a greater respect for the way the Spirit deals uniquely with each individual.

However, what one looks for in a spirituality is not merely an experience, but a way of living and praying, a road that one can walk. Thus, despite its strengths, a spirituality based *exclusively* on experience

¹⁴Michael Ivens, trans., *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola* (Leominster, UK: Gracewing Publishing, 2004).

and discernment risks an excessive passivity. What is also required is a more active and dynamic dimension, that of agency and responsibility in positively engaging the spiritual life.

Ignatius's spirituality was not lacking in this more active dimension. A whole network of Ignatian images and ideas vividly express what Philip Endean has called "the Ignatian spirituality of the way." Ignatius and his first companions felt they had been graced with a "pathway to God, as it were."¹⁵ Ignatius himself was, in his preferred self-description, a "pilgrim," and the *Constitutions* were written to "help us move forward better, in conformity with our Institute, along the way that has been started which is the divine service."¹⁶ Ignatius's concern is therefore that all "make progress in the Lord." Strikingly, the formed Jesuit is one who is not merely walking but "running along the way of Christ our Lord." No wonder, then, that action is seen as a "central motif" in Ignatian spirituality.¹⁷ The God of the Exercises is one of dynamism and energy, who "works and labours" in creation (*SpEx* 260); our role is to cooperate with this action of God for his salvific purpose, always moving forward on the way of the Lord, never standing still.

But how to understand Ignatian spirituality, not merely as experience and discernment, but also as a path of life to be walked, even run? Theological ethicists, who are professionally interested in the practical and the active, may contribute something here. When they characterize spirituality, the emphasis is often on it as a way of life constituted by a set of practices.¹⁸ The late William C. Spohn is one moral theologian, and a Jesuit for many years, who developed this more practical under-

¹⁵This is the phrase from the "Formula of the Institute" as confirmed by Julius III. The earlier expression of Paul III is even more direct: "the nature of this Institute which is his pathway to God."

¹⁶Philip Endean, "The Ignatian Spirituality of the Way," *The Way* 42, no. 1 (January 2003): 8.

¹⁷David Coghlan, "Seeking God in All Things: Ignatian Spirituality as Action Research," *The Way* 43, no. 1 (January 2004): 97–108, especially p. 98).

¹⁸William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 1999); "Christian Spirituality and Theological Ethics," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, edited by Arthur Holder (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), 269–85; Richard Gula, "Morality and Spirituality," in *Moral Theology: New Directions and Fundamental Issues*, edited by James Keating (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 162–77; Jean Porter, "Virtue Ethics and Its Significance for Spirituality," *The Way Supplement* 88 (1997): 26–35.

standing of spirituality in some depth.¹⁹ This is an insight that is confirmed by a stream of contemporary Protestant writing that develops the importance of the *disciplines* of the spiritual life, such as prayer, fasting, celebration, service and, indeed, study, in the context of a scriptural theology that preserves the priority of God's grace.²⁰ The timeliness of Spohn's approach is also confirmed by the work of Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist of religion, who commends an incipient move to a "spirituality of practices" in American society that avoids the superficiality of New Age forms of religiosity.²¹

What, then, are these practices and why see spirituality in terms of them? An extension of a well-known example offered by the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre will help to introduce the concept.²² MacIntyre talks of introducing his nephew to chess. He begins by offering some candy to his nephew every time he plays a game of chess and some more if he wins. The child, therefore, begins playing chess as a mere means to an extraneous end. However, after a time the child begins to enjoy the game for its own sake and forgets about the candy. He is beginning to discover chess as an activity with its own internal meaning. He is open to being taught by his uncle, and learns by imitation as well as trial and error. He may join a chess club and even start reading books on chess, learning from the cumulative wisdom about the practice that has been generated over many years. In time, he develops his own flair for the game.

A practice, then, is an activity with its own internal *telos* or meaning rather than being a *technique* for some external goal, such as, recognition or money (or candy!). It is best learned through an appren-

¹⁹Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 37.

²⁰Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988); Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperOne, 1991); Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

²¹Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 172–73. It is interesting that Wuthnow explicitly gives spiritual direction at a Jesuit retreat center as an example of a foundational practice within a practice-based spirituality.

²²Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

ticeship, cultivated in the context of a community of practice, guided by a tradition of practical wisdom and good sense, and inspired by its exceptional practitioners. It is through disciplined and persevering engagement in a practice that one acquires corresponding virtues and skills, not just within that practice, but for life. Practices include chess, but also much more important activities: medicine, law, teaching, and the other professions are practices. Politics is a practice; the arts and crafts and the academic disciplines are also practices.

There are several reasons why Spohn's understanding of spirituality, including Ignatian spirituality, as a way of life constituted by a characteristic set of practices, is a helpful one. First, since practices are activities embedded in a community and tradition, a practice-based spirituality helps to correct the distortions to which a purely experience-based spirituality is prone, such as subjectivism, or unwarranted claims to the authority of one's personal experience. In other words, it helps us to avoid the danger

of Ignatian spirituality "lite," so to speak: a self-standing injunction to find God in all things divorced from the challenging requirements of the disciplines of discipleship or communal accountability. To offer an analogy, if someone were to claim, for example, that fine art is central to her life, one could reasonably ask for some evidence of

Jesuits have practices specific to their tradition (such as manifestation of conscience to the superior, the novitiate "experiments"), practices that are emphasized (such as, examen, service of the poor, study, and so on), as well as characteristic ways of doing those practices common to all Christians.

this in a set of practices: does the person read books on art history, visit the cities of the great artists, talk with experts, or do something similar? Similarly, if a person is truly spiritual, one should expect to see some spiritual practices in the context of a community and tradition: regular prayer, meetings with a spiritual guide, some kind of liturgical practice, service of others, participation in community, periodic solitude, or some other such activities.

A second reason why Spohn's characterization of spirituality is attractive is that it coheres with Christian and, in particular, Jesuit, spirituality. Spohn observes that the New Testament commends as essential the practices of "almsgiving, forgiveness, hospitality, intercessory prayer and eucharistic worship."²³ Catholics of course have the practices of the sacraments, the devotions, the works of mercy, various forms of ministry, and so on. Jesuits have practices specific to their tradition (such as manifestation of conscience to the superior, the novitiate "experiments"), practices that are emphasized (such as, examen, service of the poor, study, and so on), as well as characteristic ways of doing those practices common to all Christians. It is noteworthy that the "Formula of the Institute" defines the Jesuit way of life largely in terms of a set of apostolic practices: ministries of the Word and sacraments, education of children and the unlettered, reconciling the estranged, as well as works of charity, for example, serving those in prison and hospitals. The Spiritual Exercises are, of course, a foundational practice that influences all the others.

A Delicate Balance

What we are left with, then, is two contrasting ways of understanding Jesuit and Ignatian spirituality, one that focuses on experience and discernment, and the other that accents practices. Which is the correct one? I would argue, of course, both. They complement each other. Crucially, however, when one is neglected in favor of the other, an imbalance arises.

In the Exercises Ignatius refers to the need for balance between emphasis upon what we receive from God and what we ourselves do in response, that is, between faith and works, grace and freewill (*SpEx* 368-69). Ignatian spirituality orients us to the midpoint, where we are carried forward by grace while simultaneously being fully engaged. It therefore finds its fulfillment when life is both welcomed as a gift received (experience) and offered as a gift given (practice). To put it theologically, Ignatian spirituality exists in the realm of the cooperation of grace and freewill. As pastoral theologian James D. Whitehead says, "The delicate balance . . . is between becoming strong, respon-

²³William C. Spohn, "Spirituality and Its Discontents: Practices in Jonathan Edwards's *Charity and Its Fruits*," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31, no. 2 (2003): 256.

sible agents of our own lives and simultaneously remaining attentive respondents to a presence that precedes our insights and disrupts our plans." For Whitehead, there is always a "continuing struggle to right this balance."²⁴

Here it may help to consider an example of what the delicate balance between openness to experience and commitment to practice, between the passive and the active, looks like in the concrete, for example, in the sphere of prayer. A man arrives at a retreat house on his first three-day retreat. He says he is very faithful to his fifteen minutes of daily prayer in his well-arranged prayer space; he also has clear goals about what he wants on his retreat. He does note, however, that his customary fifteen minutes of prayer are not very satisfying. After the first day of the retreat, he confesses to his director that his prayer was empty; already he feels discouraged. The director asks a simple question: "Outside the periods of prayer, did you experience anything positive?" "Yes, as it happens," he responds hesitantly. "I was passing a tree in the garden and became fascinated by a bird's nest I saw there. I felt as though I would love to just curl up inside it." "And what would that feel like, to be curled up inside that nest?" "It would feel safe and comfortable and restful." The director suggests he spend the next day without any formal periods of prayer, but just enjoy the rest, and walk around the gardens, and sleep whenever he feels like sleeping. In an intuitive attempt to "follow the grace," he offers him only a single verse from Scripture: "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10).

The next meeting reveals a more positive prayer experience, and also a new insight. There are two aspects to his personality: a very systematic, organized self that is good at balancing the manifold responsibilities of a professional, father, and husband. And then there is a much more spontaneous self. This self, the retreatant explains, loves dancing and singing; it is more relational than task-focused. The retreat gives him a sense that the Spirit is inviting him to relate to God in prayer with his more spontaneous self, and to loosen the dominance of his more task-centered self. He leaves the retreat feeling the Lord is welcoming back into his life a part of himself that had been overshadowed by his organizing self in his prayer and, indeed, all his relationships.

²⁴James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1981), 146–47.

Practice, on its own, therefore, can become a barrier rather than a path to God. Ignatius experienced this himself in Manresa, when he thought he could justify himself in the eyes of God through his observance of spiritual practices, at which he persevered to an extreme, until they almost broke him. It was only when he could let go and let himself be loved by the forgiving Father that he was able to move forward.

There is, however, a danger here of losing one's balance by thinking that experience has such priority that practice falls away completely; of so emphasizing spontaneity that we lose sight of the place for discipline. It is not that practice disappears, but rather that a more organic practice, a discerned way of praying and living, opens up for the pilgrim.

Let us take a different example. Suppose a Jesuit student tells his spiritual director that the habit of regular prayer has slipped, as a result of the pressures of time and distraction. It is, after all, difficult to pray during studies. What would be the best approach for the spiritual guide? An experience-centered approach would ask where in his experience he nevertheless found consolation. In support of this response, it might be observed that Ignatius does not lay down any strict rule about how a professed Jesuit should pray, other than that he should observe the two daily exams and discern the rest with his confessor and, if necessary, his superior.²⁵ The key thing is to find God in all things.

This experience-centered approach may bear fruit, but if this process is repeated, then the student can easily gain the impression that regular time in prayer is not that necessary. Indeed, the flexible advice Ignatius gives to the fully professed, who are assumed to be "running along the way of Christ our Lord," may be given too soon to a Jesuit student, for whom Ignatius lays down more specific guidelines. Furthermore, even though Ignatius does not mandate a specific period of prayer for the fully professed, he is not so relaxed with them as to fail to provide a tool for discernment about what discipline of prayer, meditation, fasts, vigils, and other austerities they should undertake:

On the one hand, they should take care that the excessive use of these practices not weaken their bodily strength and take up so much time that they are rendered incapable of helping the neigh-

²⁵ CN [582-83].

bour spiritually according to our Institute; on the other hand, they should be vigilant that these practices not be relaxed to such an extent that the spirit grows cold and the human and lower passions grow warm.²⁶

This is an application of the doctrine of the mean: the virtue in spiritual practice lies in the middle between excess and deficiency. O'Leary shows that, on the one hand, Ignatius was keen to limit pious practices for Jesuits who were praying for up to seven hours a day and were inclined to retire to a desert, because their excess was getting in the way of their apostolate. On the other hand, however, Ignatius was equally keen to ensure that the professed not grow too slack in their practice and so fall away spiritually.²⁷ I would suggest that today, given the pressures of modern religious life, the Jesuit is more likely to be tempted to deficiency rather than excess in spiritual discipline; so *agere contra*, or going against the disordered tendency towards the mean, is in the direction of more rather than less practice. The spiritual director of the above Jesuit student, therefore, may do better to support him in fidelity to prayer, rather than focus exclusively on experience.

A spirituality of experience and reflection upon experience by itself, then, is not enough. Rigidity is a vice, but so is the other extreme, a lack of vigilance in spiritual disciplines. While we can never force God's hand or command his friendship, we can and should prepare and dispose ourselves for grace. That is why we need more than attentiveness to spiritual experience. We also need fidelity to a set of tried and tested practices—an asceticism, if you will—if we are to hope to make progress in the Lord as Ignatius desired.

Some Questions

What I advocate, then, within the context of the contemporary renewal of Ignatian spirituality, is a gentle and discerned refocusing on our engagement with practices as an integral part of the spiritual life. One might say that someone needs to rewrite Rodriguez's *Practice of Perfection and the Christian Virtues*; this time, however, with a set of practices fitting for a missionary charism, all within an approach that affords primacy to discernment and experience.

²⁶Ibid., [582].

²⁷O'Leary, *Sent into the Lord's Vineyard*, 74.

Even with these qualifications, however, many religious who lived through the council may suspect calls for a renewed emphasis upon asceticism as a nostalgia for a form of religious life that never existed; they may perceive in some of the younger generation of religious a reactionary clinging to the reassurance of external structures and forms. Younger Jesuits, on the other hand, themselves raised in the anomie of postmodern culture, may be critical of what they perceive to be an excessive critique of order and structure in their instructors.

My hope is that, in an essay such as this, it is possible to bypass these potentially conflictual political issues by the simple observation that spiritual formation necessarily requires commitment to certain habitual practices of prayer, service, and community, or it will not have the staying power for the long haul of the Christian life; and, *at the same time*, that we should not be blind to the danger of ossified religious forms that threaten to suffocate the true spirit of the Gospel. As Joseph Veale puts it, Ignatius would have wanted those trained in the Exercises to be “neither doctrinaire pelagians nor doctrinaire quietists, neither anti-mystical nor anti-ascetical.”²⁸ The virtue, as Ignatius teaches, lies in the mean. A balanced approach is what is desirable. The challenge, of course, is finding so delicate a balance.

In the Exercises themselves, the requirement of practice is clearly articulated in annotation 6, where Ignatius advises the retreat director how to respond to an exercitant who is not affected by spiritual movements. His counsel is that “the exercitant should be questioned closely about the exercises, as to whether they are being made at their appointed times, and in what way, and similarly as to whether the additions are being carefully followed” (*SpEx* 6).

It seems to me that this annotation can be applied by *analogy* to many practices outside of the context of the Exercises. If, as a Jesuit who studies, I am struggling spiritually, it is worth asking: Am I engaging in the key practices of a Jesuit in studies? Am I, for example, regularly attending Mass, seeing a spiritual director, taking part in community meals, engaging in pastoral work, and approaching studies in a spiritual way as a service to God and others? Am I praying regularly? Do I do my yearly retreat with care and commitment? Do I give time to

²⁸Joseph Veale, “Ignatian Prayer or Jesuit Spirituality,” *The Way Supplement*, no. 27 (1976): 8.

friendship and Sabbath? Am I devoting sufficient time and energy to my primary mission, namely, my study? And so on. What a Jesuit student, who has grown up in a postmodern context where commitment and fidelity to long-term practices of depth is notably difficult, may find helpful in spiritual direction is a bit of spiritual life-coaching, so to speak: not only a focus on spiritual experience, but also some support and accountability in discerning and remaining faithful to spiritual practices.

II. A Twofold Examen

Following Spohn, I have argued that, when rightly discerned and motivated, spiritual practice remains an essential component of any Christian spirituality. If this is correct, then the way forward is through the discernment of a spiritual experience that can free one from the rigidities of a spiritual Pelagianism, on the one hand, and a diligence in practice that prevents the slippage into quietism and resignation in the face of obstacles, on the other. If there is a single Ignatian tool that enables us to find this synergy, it is that of the examen. How, then, should we make this important prayer if we are to preserve the delicate and mutually informing balance of passive and active?

The Examen of Experience

The origin of our contemporary understanding of the examen lies in a seminal article written in 1972 by George A. Aschenbrenner, S.J.²⁹ Aware that the examen had tended to degenerate into a legalistic examination of sins, and had therefore lost its central place in the spiritual lives of Jesuits and other religious, Aschenbrenner reformulated this prayer as a “daily intensive exercise of discernment.”³⁰

Aschenbrenner achieves two things. The first is constructive: he offers the consciousness or awareness examen. Centrally, this examen is a daily exercise in the discernment of spirits that grows into a charac-

²⁹George A. Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness Examen,” *Review for Religious*, no. 31 (1972): 14–21. I shall refer to the version that is reprinted in “Consciousness Examen,” in *Notes on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola [The Best of the Review, Review for Religious]*, edited by David Fleming (St Louis: Review for Religious, 1981), 175–85.

³⁰Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness Examen,” 175.

ter disposition. The goal of the prayer, then, is to develop “a heart with a discerning vision to be active not only for one or two quarter-hour periods in a day but continually.”³¹ When a person engages in the consciousness examen, the primary focus is not upon what I have done or failed to do, but rather on God at work in my day. In other words, the examen of consciousness is an examen on *experience*.

This is the approach that has borne such fruit in the lives of Ignatian apostles in the intervening forty years. The book on the examen prayer by Timothy M. Gallagher, O.M.V., to which Aschenbrenner contributes the introduction, richly illustrates what the consciousness examen can look like in the lives

of lay and religious, young and old.³²

The council itself had already produced a justly famous description of the conscience: “Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths.”

If Aschenbrenner’s first achievement is to say what the consciousness examen is, his second is to say what it is *not*. Here he draws a sharp contrast between the examen of consciousness and what he calls the examen of

conscience. The latter is the reflection of a legalistic mentality, is indistinguishable from preparation for confession, and easily degenerates into an unhealthy preoccupation with atomistic sins. The value of the simple practice of noticing God in my day is lost.

Aschenbrenner does also describe the examen of conscience as an attempt to uproot vices and grow in the virtues. This may sound like a more positive version of the conscience examen, but once again Aschenbrenner is negative, identifying this practice with “a Ben-Franklin like striving for self-perfection.”³³ The particular examen is especially at risk of becoming this kind of self-focused exercise: “It has often become an effort to divide and conquer by moving down the list of vices or up the list of virtues in a mechanically planned approach to self-

³¹Ibid., 178.

³²Timothy M. Gallagher, *The Examen Prayer: Ignatian Wisdom for Our Lives Today* (New York: Crossroad, 2006).

³³Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness Examen,” 176.

perfection."³⁴ The worry here, for Aschenbrenner, is that the examen prayer becomes a matter of ticking (or crossing) the boxes, rather than being a genuine prayer, open to the promptings of the Spirit.

Aschenbrenner was not attacking a straw man. One need only consult Rodríguez's treatise on the examen of conscience, with its beads for counting sins, to gain an impression of what was prescribed for novices.³⁵ Joseph A. Tetlow, S.J., describes its twentieth-century practice in an American context, and refers to it pejoratively as the "accountant's examen."³⁶

Sometimes those raised on the awareness examen are puzzled to find that the text in the Exercises seems much closer to what Aschenbrenner disparages as the conscience examen. Nevertheless, it would be premature to critique him on this basis. As David Townsend, S.J., has shown, the entire process and dynamic of the Exercises presupposes a kind of consciousness examen, with its attentiveness to experience; for example, in the Rules for Discernment and the account of prayer given to the retreat director.³⁷ We also see the awareness examen in Ignatius's story when he notices the difference between his knightly fantasies and thoughts of God, "learning from experience that one kind of thoughts left him sad and the other cheerful."³⁸ Timothy Gallagher also gives an illuminating exposition of how Ignatius, as recorded in his spiritual diary, practiced the examen of consciousness during an especially important moment in his spiritual life.³⁹ There is no question that Aschenbrenner hit upon something that is not only fruitful today, but was a key element in Ignatius's spiritual life and teaching.

Aschenbrenner does, however, overdraw the contrast between "consciousness" and "conscience," in that he tends to characterize the

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Rodríguez, "The Seventh Treatise: On the Examen of Conscience," vol. 1 of *Practice of Perfection and Christian Virtues*.

³⁶Joseph A. Tetlow, "The Most Postmodern Prayer: American Jesuit Identity and the Examen of Conscience, 1920-1990," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 26, no. 1 (January 1994): 3-8.

³⁷David Townsend, "The Examen and the Exercises: A Reappraisal," *Way Supplement*, no. 52 (1985): 53-63.

³⁸*The Autobiography of St. Ignatius Loyola with Related Documents*, trans. Joseph F. O'Callaghan, ed. John C. Olin (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), 24.

³⁹Gallagher, *Examen Prayer*, 51.

latter as irredeemably moralistic.⁴⁰ In the years since Aschenbrenner wrote, theologians have moved away from the conscience found in the old moral manuals, associated with a shopping-list approach to the confessional, to a more personal understanding. Indeed, the council itself had already produced a justly famous description of the conscience: "Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths."⁴¹ As moral theologian Richard Gula puts it, "We understand the moral conscience holistically as an expression of the whole self as thinking, feeling, intuiting and willing person."⁴² If that is what the conscience is, then the "conscience" examen need not be negatively contrasted with the "consciousness" examen.

Second, and more important, there is one crucial element missing from the consciousness examen, namely, a sufficiently active dimension. Admittedly, Aschenbrenner does note that, while the primary concern is upon how God has been at work in us, there is a legitimate secondary focus upon action: "Secondarily our concern is with our actions insofar as they were responses to His calling."⁴³ I have no objection to the injunction to "respond to God's grace": to walk in the Spirit is precisely what the examen is there to help us to do. Yet Aschenbrenner gives us no practical sense of what that might involve. Is one, for example, to sit about waiting for a felt inspiration of the Spirit before acting? Hardly. But if not that, then what?

Aschenbrenner's positive insight into the examen breathed new life into a keystone practice of the Ignatian life. His emphasis on awareness over action, however, designed to avoid the deficiencies of the Rodriguez-style examen, risks having the unintentional result of breaking the integral link between the examen and spiritual practice. Is it possible today, then, to go beyond the examen of experience, to integrate more successfully this active dimension of Ignatian spirituality into this characteristically Ignatian prayer?

⁴⁰Aschenbrenner, "Consciousness Examen," 1981, 176.

⁴¹*Gaudium et spes*, 16

⁴²Richard M. Gula, "Conscience," in *Christian Ethics: An Introduction*, edited by Bernard Hoose (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1988), 114.

⁴³Aschenbrenner, "Consciousness Examen," 180.

The Examen of Practice

What I call the examen of practice, or praxis examen, is, like the awareness examen, a natural human tendency that can be cultivated into a spiritual practice. The natural tendency is to adjust one's practice in the light of the experience of doing something, thereby engaging in a continual cycle of experiential learning and improvement.

This cycle has today been refined into a systematic approach to learning, pastoral ministry, and professional development, often referred to as "reflective practice," "experiential learning," or "action research." One model sees four primary stages in the cycle: practical experience, reflection on this experience, the drawing-out of general principles and ideas from this reflection, and finally the planning of actions using these principles.⁴⁴ It has been employed in education, health care, professional development, business, leadership, ministry, and many other fields. The cycle, however, can take an explicitly spiritual form, when we are seeking to improve the quality of our response to God's grace. Indeed, David Coghlan, S.J., has argued along these lines that the examen can be seen a "structured set of methods for developing the interaction between [prayer and activity]," a particular kind of "action research."⁴⁵ Is there any evidence of this kind of examen of practice in Ignatius?

The Particular Examen

We have seen that the examen of experience is a basic practice in the Spiritual Exercises. One place to look for the examen of practice is in the "Particular Examen" (*SpEx* 24-31).⁴⁶ The first thing to note about this exercise is its prominent place in the Spiritual Exercises, coming immediately after the Principle and Foundation. It is as though Ignatius is saying, "We're about to launch into the Exercises proper; the very first thing the exercitant needs to do is get this practice down, right from the start." The particular examen is what today would be termed a "keystone habit," a positive practice that is capable of generating and sustaining many others. For it is by means of the particular examen that

⁴⁴David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1984).

⁴⁵Coghlan, "Seeking God in All Things."

⁴⁶See also *SpEx* 6, 77, 90, 160, 238-47, 319, 333 and 334.

the exercitant will learn to faithfully put into practice the Exercises that are laid out, and to adapt them according to his or her own temperament, state of life and, indeed, discerned experience.

Second, while it is reasonable to assume that, in accord with basic Ignatian presuppositions, the particular examen is a prayer of discernment, it is also true that the prayer does not continually rediscern God's will. For example, Ignatius would have us ask ourselves in the particular examen after prayer whether we have faithfully followed the additional practices, and to resolve to do better where we have fallen short. He does not ask us to rethink from scratch how to pray every time we sit down in the chapel. All things being equal, a discernment, once made, can be trusted.

Third, therefore, in addition to "tracking" the quality of my engagement, or failure to engage in some practice in the way laid down, a key element of the particular examen is thus the firm resolve (*SpEx* 24),

To attain the "just mean," it is necessary to acquire habits of restraint and abstinence by practicing agere contra against the disordered inclination to excess, not so as to eliminate appetite, but to form it anew.

for example, during prayer to be faithful to the preparatory petition, the preludes, the points, and the colloquy.⁴⁷ For the aim is not merely to perform on-off actions, but to get into certain habits that eventually acquire the spontaneity and ease of "second nature." When one repeatedly begins prayer, for example, by raising

one's mind to "consider how God our Lord is looking at me" (*SpEx* 75), one begins to get into the habit of praying by attending to God rather than giving in to the sinful tendency to focus always on self. But to get into this habit requires intentionality and determination.

Without the particular examen the exercitant could easily fall prey to the temptation to fall short on important disciplines and, out of distraction or the inertia of the moment, to put in less time than is required or, alternatively, to merely crank through a rigid way of doing

⁴⁷It was from the ascetical tradition of the Desert Fathers that Ignatius may have derived the idea of a "firm resolve"; that is, the determination to live out what one has discerned and not give up at the first sign of difficulty.

things without making the necessary recalibrations to suit times, persons, and circumstances and, above all, the movements of the Good Spirit. The particular examen is, therefore, a means for exercising, and growing in, the practices and virtues of the life of prayer and, by extension, of the Christian life in general. It is a crucial element in the cycle of continual improvement, or “progress in the Lord,” that was so important to Ignatius.

Rules, Rules, Rules

Another place to look for the praxis examen is in the multiple sets of rules that Ignatius produces. Within the Exercises there are rules for praying, discerning, examining one’s conscience, almsgiving, eating, fasting, and sleeping, and for thinking with the Church. Elsewhere Ignatius offers rules for modesty and for proper behavior at villa. When he writes to the Jesuits missioned to a specific apostolate, his gift to them is often a set of rules. This is not even to mention the Constitutions and the many rules he proposes there.

It is a commonplace to observe that Ignatian rules are not absolute exceptionless norms. When Jerónimo Nadal expounds at length on how to conduct the ministry of spiritual conversation, he ends by adding this observation:

These are but a few hints. There are no hard and fast rules. Circumstances of time and place, and the character or temperament of the person involved, might indicate another approach. The resourceful apostle will be guided by a holy tact in all his conversations.⁴⁸

It is characteristic of Ignatian discretion, therefore, always to attend to situational factors and the movements of the Spirit.

So there may be no absolute rules in Ignatian spirituality. Yet there are rules. Lots of them. Ignatius did not make do with a general principle: discern and do what you will. On the contrary, he put a lot of energy into articulating more specific sets of rules. What, then, are their nature and purpose?

⁴⁸Thomas H. Clancy, *The Conversational Word of God: A Commentary on the Doctrine of St. Ignatius of Loyola Concerning Spiritual Conversation, with Four Early Jesuit Texts* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978), 55.

Ignatius's Rules for Eating offer an intriguing case study (*SpEx* 210-217). The Rules are "for the future ordering of one's life as regards eating" (*SpEx* 210).⁴⁹ At one level, then, as lived during a retreat, these rules provide for an extended period of practice in building new habits of eating. The aim is to become, in the classical phrase deriving from Plato's *Republic*, "master of oneself," *dominus sui*, not ruled by one's disordered passions (215). Thus, to attain the "just mean," it is necessary to acquire habits of restraint and abstinence by practicing *agere contra* against the disordered inclination to excess, not so as to eliminate appetite, but to form it anew. Aware that our hunger tends to distort our judgment about what is an appropriate amount at the precise time that we arrive at a meal, Ignatius advises the exercitant to resolve how much to eat well before the meal, when the stomach is still full from the last one, and to stick to that (217). A *firm resolve*, once again, is necessary because the enemy will leave nothing undone in his attempts to undermine a good intention (cf. 12). In addition, the exercitant is to get into the habit of eating plain fare and taking delicacies only in small quantities (212). All this is material to aid the exercitant's examen of practice, of learning from her experience what helps and what hinders and to adjust her strategy accordingly. Thus, through the cycle of action, experience, discernment, and resolve, the exercitant gradually forms new, more temperate habits of eating.

However, for Ignatius this whole process of learning from practical experience is guided by spiritual discernment, which is the most reliable method of finding the "just mean" (213). If one cuts back so much that one has no energy to pray, one has gone too far. If one's consolations increase, that is a sign that one is moving in the right direction. In a similar way, when talking about sleep as well as eating, Ignatius suggests that, in a spirit of experimentation, we make changes or "alterations" in order to find the graces one seeks (89). Coghlan seems right, therefore, when he writes that the examen can be seen as a kind of spiritual "action research" that properly falls into the realm of discernment. By practical experimentation and sensitivity to spiritual movements, one finds the way forward in the ordering of life as regards eating.

⁴⁹The best commentary on these rules remains David Townsend, "Digesting the Rules for Eating," *Way Supplement*, no. 58 (1987): 86-103.

It seems to me, therefore, that Ignatius's rules are *distilled discernments*: summaries of what, by experience, has been found to help one attune oneself with God's will and to put these discernments into a form that can be helpful to oneself and to others. Their function is twofold: to guide future discernment (so that one does not have to reinvent the spiritual wheel every time one gets up in the morning) and, crucially, to support integrity of intention in living out what has already been discerned. Discernment by itself is not enough to support a way of life, lest we become like the one who hears and discerns the will of God but fails to act on it, and thus builds one's spiritual house upon quicksand (cf. Matt. 7:26).

Examen is the practice of discernment and navigation in the spiritual life, whereby one monitors and guides oneself in the right direction, aided by the rules or "distilled discernments" of the tradition.

We are to be doers as well as hearers of the Word. For discernments are to be enacted and so woven gradually into the fabric of one's life, one's habitual way of proceeding. This enactment of discernments is more than Aschenbrenner's "respond to grace"; or rather, it is a concrete suggestion about how to practice this imperative. Again, what is required in the examen is not merely noticing God at work in my day, but also a firm resolve that helps me live what I have discerned.

Traditionally, it has been thought that there are two examens, the general and the particular; and it has always been a bit of a struggle to understand how to the two fit together. I suggest that there is only one examen, which, like Google Maps, can adopt a broader perspective (general examen) or be more focused on some more limited section of the landscape (particular examen). It helps to "zoom in" on some specific sphere of experience for a week or a month, for example, when hoping to acquire or grow in a specific habitual practice, all the while keeping a more general eye on one's overall practice and experience.

There is, nevertheless, a kind of duality within the examen, whether general or particular: the duality of the passive and the active, of experience and practice. An image may help to express this idea. I once had the opportunity to go out onto the sea in a small sailing boat, under the guidance of an experienced sailor. The key to success, I was

taught, was a simple yet delicate art. One had simultaneously to attend to whether one's sails were "luffing" or flapping in the wind, and to use the tiller to adjust the direction of the boat. Once the optimal combination was reached, the boat sailed along effortlessly and delightfully, the wind filling the tight sails. By analogy, examen is the practice of discernment and navigation in the spiritual life, whereby one monitors and guides oneself in the right direction, aided by the rules or "distilled discernments" of the tradition, as well as one's own remembered discernments, always recalibrating in response to the movements of the Spirit. If experience is spirituality-as-gift and practice is spirituality-as-way, then examen is spirituality-as-navigation: only when all three are present does one make sure progress in the Lord in the Ignatian way.

III. The Spiritual Experience of Study

I have dwelt at some length on what I propose are the three dimensions of Ignatian spirituality. If this is an accurate description, the challenge is to see how these dimensions may be applied to the act of study itself. There are three questions or challenges, then, to answer:

How, if at all, can studies be seen as a spiritual experience?

What would an Ignatian practice of study look like?

How to practice a twofold examen on the experience and practice of study?

To this threefold challenge we now turn.

First, then, is it possible to see study as a spiritual experience? Because of what Ignatius has taught us in the Rules for Discernment, it is relatively easy to notice, name, and talk about the experiences of consolation and desolation in prayer. At least, this is a skill which Ignatian people learn, with help from spiritual direction. Yet how can one name one's experiences of consolation and desolation in study?

There is at least one potential dialogue partner that may be of help: a contemporary form of psychology that avoids behavioristic reductionism and, like Ignatian spirituality itself, focuses in part upon the self and subjectivity. I refer here to "positive psychology," and in

particular to the theory of flow that has been worked out by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi.⁵⁰ What he provides through this concept is a secular spirituality that exhibits the same structure as Ignatian spirituality—of experience, reflection, and practice. The striking parallels between the two suggest the possibility of a holy, albeit not entirely uncritical, alliance between Ignatian spirituality and positive psychology.

I suggest, then, that, in order to name one's experience of consolation and desolation in study, it is helpful to notice the times one's experiences *flow*, and its opposite, *psychic entropy*. These psychological terms provide partial equivalents of the Ignatian terms "consolation" and "desolation." What, then, is flow?

Against the predominant focus of psychology upon mental illness and normal human functioning, Csíkszentmihályi studied individuals who engaged in activities more for their intrinsic rather than extrinsic rewards—artists, sportsmen, dancers, and musicians. Csíkszentmihályi's focus was on the quality of their subjective experience: what was it like to engage in these "autotelic" or intrinsically meaningful activities? As a consequence of his studies, he developed the concept of *flow*: "These exceptional moments are what I have called *flow experiences*. The metaphor of "flow" is one that many people have used to describe the sense of effortless action they feel in moments that stand out as the best in their lives."⁵¹

According to Csíkszentmihályi flow activities manifest a number of characteristics. They involve a high degree of concentration on a limited field of consciousness. Attention is completely invested in a given activity, and the normal anxieties and preoccupations of life are forgotten. Similarly, there is a self-forgetfulness to flow; because attention is so highly invested in the activity itself, the self loses consciousness of itself. Although invisible during the flow experience itself, the self emerges strengthened, with a greater sense of what it is capable of, after having experienced the episode of being fully functioning. Notably, during flow, time passes quickly: "That was an hour? It felt like five minutes!" There is also a paradoxical sense of effortless-in-action

⁵⁰Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

⁵¹Csíkszentmihályi, *Finding Flow*, 29.

that is characterized both by full investment in the activity and the absence of a sense of strain. Above all, flow activities are “autotelic,” containing rewards within the actions themselves rather than being dependent for their meaning on external rewards like recognition or money.

While Csíkszentmihályi notes that the flow concept was developed “as a result of sheer curiosity,” a piece of pure research, there have been a number of practical implications in fields such as work, leisure, psychotherapy, and even antidrug policy.⁵² For example, it was found that the degree to which students experienced flow in their studies turned out to be a better predictor of final grades than previous measures of achievement or aptitude, and ways of improving education through flow have consequently been proposed.⁵³

Is there any possibility of a fruitful dialogue between Ignatian spirituality and flow? Isabella S. Csíkszentmihályi, the wife of Mihály, uses flow to look for a psychological explanation of the success of the early Jesuits.⁵⁴ She claims that “the Jesuit rules provided an optimal set of conditions by which young men could live the entirety of their lives as a single flow experience.”⁵⁵ Phyllis Zagano and C. Kevin Gillespie also reflect on the possible connections between Ignatian spirituality and flow:

Can we regard the Spiritual Exercises, and the daily Examen, as means to increase personal openness to experiences of “flow”? Might “flow” allow one to be more open to the movements of the Spirit? . . . [O]ne can speculate that Ignatian disciplines may enhance the possibility of “flowlike” experiences. . . . Perhaps, too, there are affinities between “flow” and the increase in felt expe-

⁵²Isabella Selega Csíkszentmihályi and Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, eds., *Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies of Flow in Consciousness* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 11.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁴Isabella Selega Csíkszentmihályi, “Flow in a Historical Context: The Case of the Jesuits,” in I. Csíkszentmihályi and M. Csíkszentmihályi, eds., *Optimal Experience*, 232–49.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 232.

rience of the theological virtues, faith, hope and love, that lies at the foundation of Ignatian consolation.⁵⁶

I would claim that there is indeed an “affinity” between flow and consolation. Most of the essential elements of flow equally characterize experiences of consolation: the sense of effortless yet full engagement, a loss of any anxiety or preoccupations, self-forgetfulness during the experience, growth in a sense of self following the experience, a concentrated attentiveness, and so on.

The match is not perfect, however. It is clear that one may experience flow without experiencing consolation, since there is nothing in the definition of “flow” that relates directly to God. Indeed, Csíkszentmihályi notes that people may experience flow leading rather trivial lives, such as total devotion to surfing or rock climbing.⁵⁷

On the other hand, an incarnational spirituality will not be too quick to see an experience of flow as nonspiritual simply because that experience lacks any explicit reference to God and the things of God. Part of the point of the examen, as it is currently practiced, is to grow in an awareness of how one’s experience is implicitly a spiritual experience, to notice times in one’s day when, although one may not have been fully aware of it at the time, the Spirit was truly at work. And it surely makes sense to look for the presence of the life-giving Spirit in those moments when I am most fully alive, when I am in flow.

Psychic entropy is a kind of psychic “noise”: “It is experienced as fear, boredom, apathy, anxiety, confusion, jealousy, and a hundred other nuances.”

Despite the potential mismatch, then, the overlap is too significant to ignore. I suggest, then, that consolation can be thought of as a specific kind of flow experience in which a person comes alive in activity because of a positive connection to God and the things of God. Not all experiences of flow are consolations, but all consolations are experiences of flow; and the experience of flow in an activity may be an initial

⁵⁶Phyllis Zagano and C. Kevin Gillespie, “Ignatian Spirituality and Positive Psychology,” *The Way* 45, no. 4 (2006): 41–58.

⁵⁷M. Csíkszentmihályi, *Finding Flow*, 71.

indication that God's Spirit is at work. Because intellectual work rarely gives rise to emotional, heartfelt experiences, flow may be especially useful in helping a student to identify the consolations found in the library or lecture room.

Just as there is a partial correlation between flow and consolation, so Csíkszentmihályi may provide us with an analogue for desolation, namely, the experience of psychic entropy. *Psychic entropy* is a kind of psychic "noise": "It is experienced as fear, boredom, apathy, anxiety, confusion, jealousy, and a hundred other nuances."⁵⁸ As Csíkszentmihályi puts it, "Psychic entropy not only causes disorder in consciousness, but it impairs its efficiency as well. Attention is withdrawn from other tasks to deal with the conflicting information."⁵⁹ Once again, the overlap with Ignatius's description of desolation can hardly be missed—the disquiet, laziness, tepidity, and sadness. Ignatius was aware that such states were a risk for the student, for he advised the scholastics at Coimbra: "As for slackness, for halfheartedness, and for boredom, whether with studies or with the other good things you do for the love of Our Lord Jesus Christ, recognize these as enemies set against your purpose."⁶⁰

What happens when Jesuits in studies are asked to reflect on their experience of flow and psychic entropy? One recognized that he experienced a high degree of flow in a liturgy group and in the experience of singing at the Eucharist. He said he "could do it all day." As for studies, he did not find flow in them for the most part, except occasionally when writing. He recognized that his difficulty in finding flow in study meant he often fell into the temptation to engage in his other, nonstudious flow activities, such as, liturgy preparation or cooking, when he felt he should be studying.

Another was in his final year of preparation for ordination as a deacon. He had had a wonderful experience of flow directing retreats over the summer. As for studies, even though he recognized they helped his ability to be a good spiritual director and future minister, he found no flow in study itself.

⁵⁸I. Csíkszentmihályi and M. Csíkszentmihályi, eds., *Optimal Experience*, 22.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*

⁶⁰Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings*, 173.

A third did find flow in his studies, in one particular topic, namely, political theology. He had chosen this area for his dissertation at the end of his theology degree, for it connected so strongly with his apostolic interests in his home country in South America. He used the word “energy” to describe his relation to this field of study. He found that he was “creative” when he studied political theology and that ideas flowed easily then.

Finally, another scholastic commented that he liked seeing other Jesuits share their experience of flow: “Their faces lit up.” He wryly noted that this was something of a contrast to the usual experience of listening to Jesuit students engaged in faith sharing!⁶¹

The concepts of flow and psychic entropy, then, provide a helpful, practical way of noticing and naming our experiences of consolation and desolation in the experience of study and the other activities of life. While we should be careful not to reduce our spiritual experience to the purely psychological, flow and psychic entropy enable even our study to be seen as a spiritual experience and a field for discernment of spirits.

IV. The Spiritual Practice of Study

The possibility of seeing studies as a spiritual experience leads us to ask a crucially important question. The Jesuits in studies who shared their experiences faced a significant challenge when focusing on their academic mission. Their reason for working at their studies had often become a matter of external rather than internal motivation: they needed to pass their exams in order to proceed through formation towards ordination, but failed to find study an autotelic, enjoyable activity in its own right. The question, then, is this: is there a way of practicing studies that disposes to the experience flow or consolation?

One way to approach this question is to see whether there is any practical wisdom in the *Spiritual Exercises* that can be applied and adapted to study. One key principle, it seems to me, lies in annotation 20, where Ignatius counsels the exercitant to withdraw from “dis-

⁶¹My thanks to these Jesuit students for their generosity in sharing their experiences so honestly.

tracting business." This withdrawal is profitable because "with a mind not divided amongst many things but entirely taken up with one thing alone . . . one's natural powers can be devoted all the more freely to the wholehearted search for what one's heart desires." (*SpEx* 20). The aim, then, is to offer one's undivided attention to prayer or, in the case of a Jesuit student, to study.

I found a simple confirmation of this principle as it applies to study when our community went on a pre-Christmas triduum retreat at a nearby Benedictine abbey. The Jesuit student referred to above who loved liturgical activities but found it difficult to find flow in studies was, by this juncture of the academic year, already three essays behind. When, at the end of the triduum, participants were asked to share the grace of their retreat, the scholastic honestly confessed that he had not done much prayer. He did, however, feel that he had received a grace. At the abbey, he explained, he was away from all distractions: he had no one to talk to, since everyone else was in silence, and, crucially, there was no way of connecting to the Internet. The result was that he found flow in concentrating fully on his essay, and it turned out to be an immensely rewarding and creative experience. He concluded that perhaps he was not as unsuited to study as he had previously imagined.

It helps to note here that the effort to cultivate our ability to be truly focused on a single field of attention, whether that be listening to a person intently, studying a difficult text, or even paying attention to God in prayer, is not merely a means to greater productivity or effectiveness, but is a "Spiritual Exercise" in the full meaning of that term. No one has expressed this insight more pertinently than Simone Weil in her classic essay, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God." She begins with this striking statement: "The key to a Christian conception of studies is the realization that prayer consists of attention."⁶² This pregnant sentence could be paraphrased: "A spirituality of study is based upon the affinity between study and prayer, in that both consist of attention." To walk into a hushed library where everyone is studiously at work is not that different from entering a place where people are at prayer: the very air is thick with the aura of attentiveness, whether what is being studied is sacred theology, philos-

⁶²Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Putnam, 1951), 105.

ophy, or theoretical physics. For Weil when studies are done with the right intention and attention, we are on the threshold of prayer itself.

Could this help us to understand Ignatius's conviction that study is one of the activities in which it is possible to relish God? If a spirituality of study sees value above all in the attentiveness of the student, then the practical challenge is how to cultivate flow and attentiveness in study, even in an environment that is in no way as free from distractions as a Benedictine abbey. There are two aspects of the challenge: attentiveness in study and cultivating a lifestyle or personal "ordo" conducive to such attentiveness.

Attentiveness within Study

Many of the norms that Ignatius proposes in the Spiritual Exercises are provided in order to help us cultivate attentiveness within prayer. For example, Ignatius counsels the exercitant to prepare his meditation beforehand (for example, *SpEx* 131, 228), so that purity of attention can be practiced during the prayer time itself. Also in the Exercises, Ignatius counsels that, as an exercitant, I should begin "always intent on the search for what I want" (76), and I should pause before the place of meditation for a few moments to gather myself (75), both of which serve to promote attentiveness. Finally, as we saw in the twentieth annotation, Ignatius counsels the exercitant to seek out "seclusion," to withdraw from all distractions.

In a similar way, then, it helps to develop a number of analogous strategies for cultivating attentiveness in study as the best preparation for flow and consolation. For example, remote preparation for study excludes as many extraneous activities from the time of study as possible, so that study time can be devoted solely and exclusively to mental work. It also helps to *single task* rather than *multitask*. I should clarify here that I do not mean that a Jesuit should not be engaged in a number of different tasks each day or respond to legitimate demands on his time. That kind of multitasking is often necessary and can even be beneficial to the life of study, bringing a kind of balance to what might otherwise be an excessive devotion to the library. However, it may help to separate these different activities, so that one single-tasks on any one of them, rather than allowing them to mutually interfere with one another. Finally, it helps to shut out as many extraneous distractions as

possible, even to keeping “a Cerberus at your door,” as one Dominican author puts it.⁶³

Even for the scholastic who remains faithfully at the desk, however, there is always the risk of many distractions, especially in our Internet age. As we saw, in the Rules for Eating, Ignatius provides guidance on how to progressively “overcome self,” rather than being someone who is carried away by a momentary impulse. No doubt today he would be providing notes for a digital asceticism. Some Jesuit students I know practice a “digital sabbath” or “digital fast” one day a week. Another has found a way of practicing the particular examen by tracking his time using “Toggl”: by noting how frequently he spends time checking his e-mail or reading blogs, he finds he can learn to limit his distraction time and use his study time for study alone. Others use the “Pomodoro” technique to improve attentiveness by breaking up their study time with frequent short breaks. Strategies for the cultivation of attention in studies are no less important in study than in prayer.

Establishing a Personal Ordo

The second task is adopting a personal “ordo” that supports the practice of attentiveness in study. Ignatius himself proposes the “ordering of one’s life” as the very purpose of the Spiritual Exercises (21). “Order” here, of course, does not mean a static structure for structure’s sake, but the adaptation of one’s energies to the end for which we have been created. In the privileged space of the full Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius lays down a detailed daily timetable for the Exercises themselves that support the attentiveness required for prayer (72). Everything, from eating, sleeping, and reading, to the keeping of silence, is ordered to the single end of a retreat: whatever helps one pray better, and so serve God and the progress of one’s soul (20).

A senior Jesuit once told me that he believed one of the secrets of Jesuit life is the value of a personal ordo for one’s day and week. What is helpful is a personalized, organic ordo that provides balance to a Jesuit’s various activities and supports his primary mission, whether that be study or something else.

⁶³Antonin Gilbert Sertillanges, *The Intellectual Life: Its Spirit, Conditions, Methods*, 8th ed. (Dublin: The Mercier Press, 1978), 98.

The first question is how to order one's *time*. In the letter to the students at Coimbra, Ignatius exhorts them at length to diligence in their studies; at the end, he adds a warning against overdoing it. Since circumstances vary so much, it is impossible to lay down a general rule for how much time one should study. In my experience I have found the most helpful approach is to adopt a gradualist approach: to track one's actual study time for a week and then, in the light of that experience, aim to increase that time by a small amount, until the right proportion of time is found. Morning, for many, is better than evening (although there are some exceptions).

Almost as important as the question of time for studies is the question of place. Ignatius shows an intuitive appreciation of situational psychology in his instructions on where and how to pray in the Exercises (for example, *SpEx* 20, 79). One thing that some find helpful is to find some location separate from one's residence, so that one has to make a pilgrimage (a spiritual as well as psychological and physical journey) to study, and a place one can leave behind at the end of the day. To have a set place in a library can be helpful. Just as the prayerful atmosphere of a church can help one to pray, so the studious atmosphere of a library can help one to study. If, however, it is necessary that one work in one's room, there are still things that can be done to make the room a place fit for studying. For example, one Jesuit student noted that he had ways of marking boundaries between sleep, prayer, and study. He would not pray until his bed had been made, since a room with an unmade bed is a room for sleeping. When he turned to prayer, he would light a candle. Finally, when he began his study, he would sit at his desk with his desk lamp on.

*The first principle
Csíkszentmihályi puts
forward is simply to identify
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"follow the grace."*

No doubt there are other important considerations in how to arrange one's activities in order to achieve the right balance that supports the spiritual practice of study: time for rest and Sabbath, giving due attention to the physical needs of the body for exercise and rest, and so

on. Once again, rules need to be discerned and adapted to the individual. Ultimately, the right approach requires the third aspect of Ignatian spirituality identified above, namely, the examen.

V. The Student's Examen

When applied to study, the examen of practice and experience, is a matter of engaging in a continual cycle of practical experience, discernment, firm resolve, and practice once again. In the light of a discriminating attentiveness to experience, practice is adjusted and fine-tuned. In order to see what this looks like, it helps once again to turn to positive psychology, which proposes two important practical principles for cultivating flow.

The first principle Csíkszentmihályi puts forward is simply to identify one's flow activities and do more of them. This resembles the contemporary Ignatian advice to "follow the grace." One beautiful example, reported by Csíkszentmihályi, concerns a woman with chronic schizophrenia.⁶⁴ It was found that she had virtually no flow experience whatsoever except, surprisingly, when she was taking care of her own fingernails. Baffled as to why this particular activity should bring her flow, the doctors nevertheless suggested she receive training as a manicurist, and she soon started looking after the nails of the other patients. Eventually, she was able to leave the hospital for the first time in over ten years, getting paid for and painting nails. While she remained schizophrenic, she had reached the ability to live a fairly functional life outside of an institution. This rather extreme example makes the practical maxim clear: identify one's flow activities and maximize them.

The problem with this first principle is that many have only limited control over what activities they engage in. A Jesuit student may be constrained by his course of studies and not always be able to pursue his own interests. Furthermore, he cannot spend too much time in the flow-giving practices of the apostolate if he is not to neglect his primary mission. But there is a second practical principle provided by Csíkszentmihályi, of importance equal to that of the first. Csíkszentmihályi points out that if we are not experiencing flow in an activity, it may be because we are not engaging in the activity in the best way, a defect

⁶⁴M. Csíkszentmihályi, *Finding Flow*, 40.

that can often be remedied. He states, "The ability to experience flow . . . certainly can be learned." Indeed, "in the last analysis it is that person who will determine whether the activity produces flow rather than anxiety or boredom."⁶⁵ This, then, is a call to responsibility: the need to recognize one's own contribution to whether one experiences psychic entropy or flow in activities such as study.

How does one do this? One key turns out to be the importance of matching challenges with skill levels. When the demand on us is too great and there are too many things to do, we tend to be anxious. When there seems nothing worth doing, we become bored. Flow is more likely to occur when there is a significant challenge that matches our skill level, without either overstretching or understretching us.

We can see this second practical principle, that of "balancing" challenge and skill levels, at work in study. In an investigation of high-school students writing a research paper, Reed Larson notes that many experienced either anxiety (overarousal) or boredom (underarousal).⁶⁶ Anxiety may be accompanied by effort and hard work, but it interferes with the ability to control attention. For example, one student began enthusiastically, but failed to narrow down her topic sufficiently and had difficulty combining the materials she had studied. With too many choices to make, she became confused and unable to concentrate.

At the other extreme, many students experienced apathy, depression, or boredom. Students enjoyed the reading but, once they came to writing, they felt that all that was left was the unexciting task of putting it all down on paper. Larson comments that these students "had little idea of opportunities for excitement in the writing process" (158). These students failed to invest the required amount of attentiveness to their task; their performance correspondingly declined.

Larson goes on to talk about the experiences of flow that some students experienced. One student was as methodical as the bored students, but when a subject excited his curiosity, he was able to redirect his attention and allow the project to develop anew. This student had

⁶⁵I. Csíkszentmihályi and M. Csíkszentmihályi, *Optimal Experience*, 31.

⁶⁶Reed Larson, "Flow and Writing," in I. Csíkszentmihályi and M. Csíkszentmihályi, eds., *Optimal Experience*, 150–169.

an ability to be attentive and sensitive to his own internal states, and to adjust his study and writing accordingly. Larson offers this comment:

What is striking in this strategy is how closely it follows prescriptions for creating flow. He seems to have been deliberately adjusting challenges to his abilities. By moving cautiously through hard parts, by stopping when overexcited, and by monitoring his energy, he regulated the balance of challenges and skills, creating conditions for enjoyable involvement. (156)

The final product of this process was a paper that exhibited a developed argument and a coherence and sophistication lacking in the projects produced by the anxious or bored students. Larson concludes, "Irrespective of ability levels, the experience of enjoyment [that is, flow] appeared to make a substantial difference in the quality of each student's final paper" (169). Interestingly, the successful students did not put more time into the project; they merely made better use of the time they had. "In sum, the ability to create enjoyment was related to more creative and efficient writing" (169).

These examples show what an examen of study might look like: a practice of discriminating attentiveness to one's experiences of studying in such a way that adjustments of effort and behavior can be made so as to move away from psychic entropy (boredom and overarousal) and towards flow. The hope is thereby to move closer to the meeting point of grace and agency that, at its center, combines effortlessness and full engagement; in the Ignatian tradition we call this the path of consolation.

V. Conclusion: Devotion in Study

In his book of images, photographer Michael Coyne includes a photograph of a Jesuit studying at night by the light of his desk lamp. The image is accompanied by the simple but important statement, "Study is an essential component of Jesuit life."⁶⁷

Yet study, while integral to the Jesuit way, is also spiritually testing. As Ignatius writes to the rector of the College of Salamanca,

⁶⁷Michael Coyne, *Second Spring: The Regeneration of the Jesuits* (Ringwood, Victoria, Aus.: David Lovell Publishing, 1997).

It is no cause for wonder that not all of our own students experience the relish of devotion that one might desire. . . . [T]he occupation of the mind with academic pursuits naturally tends to produce a certain dryness in the interior affections.⁶⁸

My friend's statement, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, that the greatest challenge in studies is not the intellectual but the spiritual challenge, rings true.

It is important not to misinterpret Ignatius's statement, however. What he says is that the Jesuit student may not experience the relish of devotion; he does not say that he lacks *devotion* itself.⁶⁹ Devotion is an "ease in finding God" in the variety of activities and events of everyday life.⁷⁰ This is the characteristic Ignatian grace—"uncanny knack for linking prayer and life."⁷¹ As O'Leary states, according to Ignatius "What is dominant in a person's life at any particular time is that person's main access to God. For scholastics it will be their studies, and there is no point in trying to find God apart from these."⁷² The Jesuit student is to cultivate devotion in study; but how?

Since the primary challenge is the lack of emotional connection often felt in studies, a contemporary Ignatian spirituality centered upon the awareness examen as currently practiced may not be enough. What I have tried to do is to offer a more constructive and dynamic approach. The language of flow and psychic entropy is at least a starting point for discerning consolation and desolation in studies. By a kind of adaptation of annotation 9 from the Exercises, a lack of consolation may point to the need to adjust practice rather than merely continue to scan experience. There is a specific kind of asceticism that the Jesuit student requires, a practice that cultivates purity of attention and freedom from distraction and orders life in a balanced way to support the spiritual practice of study itself. When such practice is founded on the twin pillars of discerned experience and a firm resolve, then the twofold ex-

⁶⁸Munitiz and Endean, eds., *Letters*, 494.

⁶⁹O'Leary, *Sent into the Lord's Vineyard*, 80.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 79.

⁷¹James Corkery, S.J., "The Drama of Living," lecture given to tertians at Manresa House, Dublin, May 2014.

⁷²O'Leary, *Sent into the Lord's Vineyard*, 79.

men of practice and experience comes into its own, enabling one to follow the direction of flow and consolation. If so, then we can hope to fulfill Ignatius's desire that Jesuit students become simultaneously "educated and devout,"⁷³ finding God in all activities, *even study*.

⁷³Ignatius's Letter of September 22, 1551, to Albert V, the Duke of Bavaria, quoted in Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, "Pietas et eruditio," *Review of Ignatian Spirituality*, no. 115 (2007): 11.

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