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Finding God in the Dark

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Who Is Ignatius?

To understand the Exercises, it is helpful to know something of the man who created them and something about the spirituality of the Jesuit tradition, which has kept alive those Exercises for the last 450 years. Ignatius of Loyola was born of minor Basque aristocracy in about 1492. Like the nobility of his time, he was interested in maintaining his position in the world by promoting himself through honour and glory. He was vain, venal, and charismatically aggressive, obsessed with the secular ideals of courtly love and chivalry. The world he sought to promote came crashing down at Pampalona, Spain (now famous for the running of the bulls) in 1521, when he was badly wounded and had to return to Loyola for a long period of enforced recuperation. There he distracted himself by reading both the lives of the saints and the worldly romances of chivalric exploits and love. He discovered that both stirred his heart to perform deeds of dramatic action. But he also noticed that the excitement he felt while reflecting on the lives of the saints remained with him, while the pleasure he felt reading the romances soon went away, leaving him desolate. He decided to follow the path of the saints rather than seek earthly glory.

There began a long period of the purification of his desires. In 1522, he found himself in a cave at Manresa, where he spent the next several months in a regime of extreme asceticism, alternating between severe depression, scruples, thoughts of suicide, and amazing mystical experiences. He decided to use his religious experience there – upon which the Spiritual Exercises as we know them today are based – to help others. Indeed, Ignatius used these Exercises to direct others, and in 1540, with some of these people formed the Society of Jesus, or as we know them today, the Jesuits. The Jesuits have their charism from that direct encounter with God that Ignatius discovered is possible for all. For St. Ignatius and in Jesuit spirituality, God is in constant and intimate dialogue with us; we experience this in our daily lives as feelings of union with or disconnection from God. It is only when we reflect on these movements within ourselves that we discover, for each one of us, that language of love.

The Exercises and Film

The Spiritual Exercises that you are holding in your hands right now, which have been tested for over 400 years, are a way to discover God's unique love for each of us and to learn that language of love with which God speaks to us. We learn this language by looking at our own lives and at the forces that shape them.

These Exercises are divided into what has traditionally been called Four Weeks. But Ignatius did not expect the person making the Exercises to complete them in a calendar month. They are meant to be adapted, as we have done here, to accommodate your personal situation. Ignatius writes, "It is not meant that each week should necessarily consist of seven or eight days.... It may be necessary...at times to shorten the Week, and at others to lengthen it" (#4). What is crucial is not fitting into a specific time frame, but having enough time to get "the fruit that is proper to the matter assigned" (#4). For Ignatius, the matter assigned in these Exercises is divided into four parts. The first part invites us to discover God's love for each one of us by looking at those areas of our lives where we have not experienced love. That

week ends when we experience a personal liberation from the forces that make us see ourselves as unlovable and unloving. The second part channels those liberated energies into a personal relationship with Christ, who manifests the Compassionate Mercy of God. The third part invites us to accompany that love in the face of suffering and death; the fourth part celebrates the triumph of God's love over the forces of destruction in the world and invites us to share in that triumph by working together to transform the world through acts of love.

You need to work through the weeks in order, since one week builds on the next, and within each week, one Exercise builds on the one preceding it. At the beginning of each week, material is given to prepare you to enter the Week; at the end, material is again given to help you see what has happened to you during that Week. At the end of the Four Weeks in this book, a final chapter ties together the whole journey. By that time you will have experienced the complete Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius using the contemplative vehicle of film.

Underlying each section is the constant mercy of God. The weeks elaborate on this basic attitude of God to us. The First Week contains the theme of us as loved sinners. The Exercises here help us get in touch with the fact that God loves us even as we sin and desires to free us from the entrapment and illusions of sin. Within the material of the First Week is an eight-day retreat on the Beatitudes, which carries us through a process of liberation to joyful service. The theme in the Second Week is one of growing intimacy with Christ as the embodiment of the Father's mercy. The Third Week deals with the passion Christ has for his God, which allows Christ, and us, to endure the passion and destruction common to all humankind without falling into despair. In the Fourth Week we experience the joy of Christ's resurrection and our entry into it, which allows us to become manifestations of God's mercy to all.

Because this book presents the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola using the medium of film, it is almost impossible to do the full exercises in 30 days. They can be done over three months, or six months, or a year. It is a wonderful way to integrate spiritual growth into your daily life, at home or in a place where you gather with others. It presents the significance of the Exercises using contemporary popular film, where watching the film becomes the act of contemplative prayer.

The book is designed to be used by individuals or groups, at home or in retreat, pastoral, academic or parish settings. Such a broad range of applications is possible because the Exercises of Ignatius focus on the imagination as embodying spirituality. Imagination does not exist in particular contexts. It is the context out of which we live our lives and the context in which the Incarnation occurs – that is, where God encounters us, communicates with us, and transforms us.

Our Imagined Worlds

St. Ignatius had the insight that we all live in imagined worlds, and that our imagination constructs the worlds in which we live using our experiences, our lived contexts, our hopes, our pains, and our joys. In effect, we live in a highly selective world, and this world defines what is possible for us. It also defines how we see ourselves, how we interact with others and the contexts in which we find ourselves.

It is now a postmodern cliché that we are shaped by the media. But humans have always been shaped by the media of their day: the preachers in a predominantly oral culture; the frescos and paintings of

religious themes in a visual culture; the spiritual dramas and novels of a literate culture. Each of these media interacted with the imaginations of their times to create a living faith, effect a conversion, or deepen people's relationship with God.

Today, the media that shape us are film and television. Television uses the sensibilities of a culture formed by film. Film proposes to us forms of the world and ethical ways of living in the world it creates. When we watch a film, we are not just being entertained; we are being formed and shaped. We are exposing ourselves to narratives that shape what is possible, and we live out of those possibilities.

Ignatian prayer uses the imagination to present to us our world, and allows us to open ourselves to the dynamic presence of God in the world. For St. Ignatius, God desires to be fully present to us and in us, and the interface between us and God occurs in the imagination during prayer. In this personal and sacred space of encounter, the energies of our lives are integrated with the divine energies of God. It is not that we are doing all the creating, or that God is doing all the creating. The creation of the world we contemplate is done by God and us working together. Later on in this book you will find the ground rules for that mutual co-operation: self-revelation, self-understanding, and communication. How they work becomes clear as you enter into the Exercises. Film is the contemporary way of entering into this mutual self-revelation of us and God; using film merely brings Ignatius' basic insight of the power of the imagination to our present world.

This book presents the basic insight that God's own medium is the Christ, and the Christ incarnates the divine mercy of God in the world. The medium is not only the message and the massage; here it becomes, even more radically, the dynamics of the one doing the Exercises. We become the living word of God in our world. For Ignatius this is "contemplation in action."

When we enter the process of this book, we enter into the process of incarnating God in the world. We become changed, and in so changing we become agents of change. We can do this by contemplating the films that guide us through the spiritual path that leads in love, and through love, to love.

(1) Cinema as Church

Why do we go to the movies? We want to be entertained, to be distracted, to be informed, we have "a thing" for one of the stars, we like the genre, the gang is going, the issues and topics attract us, we are curious. But when we look more closely at our reasons, we see that they are rooted in the basic experiences of being human and that those basic experiences are themselves expressions of the human desire for self-transcendence. The desire to be entertained and distracted comes from the attempt to escape boredom, that entrapment within oneself. To be informed comes from the quest for knowledge and truth. To be a fan of a star is to engage in a form of identification through idealization that ritualizes our own religious longings for self-awareness. Genre movies appeal to basic drives within us. Detective flicks call upon our innate desire for order; horror movies allow us to face the fears of unknown powers that can destroy us; love stories affirm the power of relationships to maintain and foster identity. And if we go to the movies to be with friends, then we see the cinema as a place for celebrating community. Finally, those who go to the cinema because of work are asked, if they are critics, to be creative; if ushers,

to be welcoming; if projectionists, to be attentive and responsible. If we fill such roles in some way when we go to the movies, we are exercising, whether consciously or not, a religious sensibility, which engages us in the rituals of self-transcendence.

Cinema is contemporary church. Beyond the postmodern axiom that image is reality – that what we see on the screen is God inasmuch as it creates and defines what is real for us – the cinema has taken on for most of our culture the effects and resources of religious worship. This is not surprising. The earliest forms of drama were religious in nature; reading originated in spirituality; visual representation was, and is (considering censorship) conscribed by the politics of the holy; and the imagination, as Samuel Coleridge defined it and as William Blake has etched on our awareness, is the divine in human form. The films we see, from the most elevated and profound to the most exploitative and banal, all share those manifestations of the divine.

Sacred Space

Picture yourself in a movie theatre. Literally, spiritually, and metaphorically. The architecture of the theatre is ecclesial in nature. It is designed for a religious ceremony so that we can be both individual and yet community. We sit in a sacred space differentiated from our everyday world by its manipulation of space and time. At the movies, it is neither day nor night. The attendant darkness is divorced from time of day or season of the year. It is its own time. What time occurs is determined by what is enacted in front of our eyes. Both the context and what we are there to see are technically designed to engage and focus all our senses in a deliberately selective manner. That engagement is not passive.

A bright light shines through a moving strip of celluloid, projecting onto a screen a series of static images which, in their superimposition, give the illusion of movement. The mind creatively transforms that illusion into a semblance of reality, and the individual takes on the critical task of evaluating the commitment he or she will make in accepting what is imagined as real. Realism is not reality. It is a cultural convention. Thus the audience spontaneously determines the level of allegorical meaning to be attached to what is being presented. Indeed, political censorship often revolves around the question of allegory, where one thing is taken to represent something else. But beyond that issue of interpretation is the broader question of how what is seen to be presented is created: production values, plot, characters, techniques used to depict the conventions of reality that are acceptable to an audience. The process by which the industry presents a product is the same as the process by which the audience translates into a product the raw data it is given.

Only then do questions of engagement and alienation occupy the audience. Both the process and the questions are profoundly spiritual in nature. The process is one of creativity; the questions of engagement are about the nature of contemplation and, in uniquely Ignatian terms, about contemplation in action. What we are looking at here is the broader notion of media literacy. Media literacy is expertise in reading and understanding media – which today includes television, cinema, and the Internet – based on the premise that the media are not transparent instruments that transmit objective messages from sender to receiver. Rather, each instrument is shaped by both sender and receiver, and manipulates the data it processes. Thus the evening TV news has been carefully tailored for its audience – including

attention span and demographics –according to the ideologies of the networks that broadcast it. The technology of television determines what is shown and how it is shown. Media literacy teaches that what is presented is not objectively and immediately real. What is shown, how it is shown, what is received and how it is received are all products of the creative imagination.

Spiritual Literacy

When God communicates with us, the same dynamics of the imagination are employed. Rawly put, media literacy is spiritual literacy; this book contains a series of exercises to make people spiritually literate by developing their media literacy. The medium in question is God's self-communication to us, in what the theology of St. John calls "the Word-made-Flesh," through the workings of the imagination. God is creative; the imagination is creative; and we are creative. In spiritual literacy, these creativities fuse in the act of contemplation.

Illiteracy, on the other hand, has a linear concept of time and a sense of inevitability. The sequence of the celluloid images admits no deviation. Its inevitability leads to a tragic view of life. What is recorded cannot be changed. This is a monolithic reading of film, of narrative, and of life. Film, though it advances, simply does not operate in this way. Flashback, simultaneity, cross-cutting, reversals, overlays, changes in perspective, tempo, lighting, tone – all create a sense of multiplicity that allows for an understanding and imagining of a God who is not caught up by a Greek chronos, by inevitability, and by tragedy, but rather allows for variation, change, the carnavalesque, all that seems to some like chaos. To read the pattern in chaos, to see chaos as part of a bigger pattern, is spiritual literacy. The journey from a monolithic view of life – regarded as natural and then, by extension, divinely ordered – requires exposure to polyvalent forms of difference. The dialogue with "otherness" requires not just a suspension of disbelief in the realism of what is other, it presupposes an ability to be present to the other in a common ground that extends beyond what has been accepted as normal. We begin to discover that we are more than who or what we think we are. That pilgrim journey into the unknown is facilitated by the films we see. We observe and reflect upon the actions and choices of the characters that attract our attention, and on the worlds in which they find themselves. We also reflect upon the way those characters and worlds are presented to us. Out of the encounter with what we contemplate, we fashion our lives and their contexts. Such contemplation is spiritual literacy.

This literacy is not a spectator sport, but a commitment. It is engaged with and defined by what it sees. Even without conscious acknowledgment, that awareness is changed by what it sees. The exposure to different films – with their different plots, techniques, rhythms, forms of narrativity and cultural sensitivities – frees an audience's perspective and imagination. This literacy is an engagement with the world common to those on a spiritual path.

What Is Contemplation?

But how does this work? Watching a film is an act of contemplation. In contemplation, you open yourself to what you contemplate, just as what you contemplate opens itself to you. In that encounter, both are changed. In Ignatian contemplation, you take a scripture passage and enter into the action. There are levels of involvement here as there are in watching a film. You can be a spectator – an enormous involvement because you attribute unity and

coherence to what you are watching. A deeper level is possible when you get emotionally involved and become part of the action. At an even deeper level, you can be so moved that the experience is visceral and transformative. In all of these levels, the creative energies of the imagination are engaging the whole person, which is different from fantasy or daydreaming, where there is limited or superficial involvement. In contemplative prayer, intentionality is important. We desire to make contact with God; in prayer, God also desires to make contact with us. In that prayer, human creativity meets divine creativity through the imagination. When one uses film as prayer, the same thing happens.

In that act of mutual presence, the viewer experiences a story that explores possibilities within a defined context and embodies values in actions and choices. This occurs in the content of the film and in the way that content has been formulated technically. Editing, camera angle, lighting, sound, even the stock used all contribute to an overall sensation which, though spontaneous, has been mediated by a creative process. A person watching has instinctive reactions to what is being presented, which are experienced as feelings. In watching a film, we are present to a depiction of certain values that reinforce, erode or challenge our value systems. In contemplation, we are attuned to our imagination; we resonate with or come into conflict with what we value. As a result, we enter a state of either consolation or desolation.

Consolation and Desolation

These Ignatian terms need explanation. In the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, the terms are used in a nuanced way. Those who delight in selfishness experience consolation when they get the opportunity to live selfishly. But those who are trying to be free from their selfishness experience desolation as they struggle against those habits that give pleasure but are not liberating. The terms are used in this way for people oriented towards their own interests. They are used differently, however, for those people whose orientation is away from selfishness and towards any form of self-transcendence, such as care for others and the betterment of the community. One experiences consolation when one moves to the good and to the greater good, but desolation when one rejects the greater good. Consolation and desolation are not feelings. They are indicators of the direction in which we are pointed based on our underlying attitude. If we are basically selfish, looking at the greater good causes desolation; if we are basically caring, then looking at the greater good causes consolation. In spiritual direction, a good director will first allow us to find out who we are, and then to help us see which direction we are going in, and help us figure out the next step to take on the path.

A Liturgical Act

So when we watch a film, what we feel depends on our basic commitment. The film shows us who we are. This is a profoundly spiritual act, but going to a movie is also a liturgical act. Going to the cinema is public prayer; watching a DVD or a video with friends or alone can be communal or private prayer. That prayer is an encounter with an "otherness" that helps us define ourselves. We define ourselves through acts of the imagination. Film is a product of that imagination. Today, life is often mistakenly separated from the imagination. Some authorities denigrate imagination by defining it in culturally aesthetic terms. What they are doing is setting "life" as an absolute value, knowing that in controlling the experiences of

life, they restrict what is "real" to what happens. But the contemplative act – whether watching a film or praying – fuses imagination and life. What happens is only one version of what is real, of what is possible. Film explores those possibilities and allows us to explore imaginatively our possibilities in the world. As in prayer, that engagement occurs in a context that is secure enough for us to become vulnerable so that we may engage with imagination. We do not just hand ourselves over to the film to imprint itself upon our awareness, just as we do not simply hand ourselves over to prayer. Both are relationships, and the communication is mediated by our imagination.

For Ignatius, God is not separate from us. A constant dialogue has been going on between God and us all through our lives and all through creation and human history. For God, and for us, creation is not a fixed, self-enclosed entity. What we experience as creation is the ongoing process of God creating. Creation is not complete; for the Christian, creation is open and incomplete and finds its integrity beyond itself in God. Sin, in whatever form it takes, is alienation from God. Sin seeks to find its integrity without God. Transcendence is going beyond self-enclosure, not into nothingness but into dialogue with God that results in an ever-more inclusive relationship with God. Within human history, that dialogue is symbolized in the holy people of the times, then through the Christ and through the gift of his Spirit in each of our lives and in our world.

When we enter into contemplative prayer and find our imaginations enacting the drama of a scriptural passage, is this just a willed projection of our desires and fears? Sometimes it can be that. But in moments of true prayer, we find ourselves carried out of ourselves into places of surprise or to insights that we could not have imagined or created by ourselves. What happens then is that the history, the concerns, and the energies of our lives become the material and the media God uses for self-expression.

But just as there is within each of us that basic desire to be one with God and within God to be one with us, there is within us a selfishness that does not desire self-transcendence. Each of us, without exception, is trapped in encompassing forms of destruction that distort human freedom and seek to frustrate the human desire to love and be creative and to create community. Often, knowingly or unknowingly, we participate in them. Sometimes our institutions – religious, cultural, or juridical – destroy the innocent, the marginalized, or those without power or voice.

In those contexts we are asked to align ourselves with the good, to overcome our selfishness, and to be creative in transforming the world. But before we can do that, we need to understand who we are and what is possible for us. Otherwise we contribute to the patterns of destruction out of ignorance or a self-will that deludes itself that it is working for the good.

Seeing Ourselves

We cannot step out of ourselves or out of the creation to make some sort of objective judgment about the situations in which we find ourselves. What we can do is enter into the dialogue with the One who makes creation. That dialogue occurs in the contemplative mode, which is where film becomes significant. With film we get the opportunity to see ourselves in two basic ways.

First, in film we are shown representations of life that interact with our horizons of consciousness. We begin with what we know; then there is what we know we do not know; next is what we do not want to know; and beyond that is what we do not know we do not know.

In film, more than any other medium, we are in touch with that diversity; through that contact we discover that our world extends beyond our immediate concerns and interests.

Second, the films we watch stir up in us the basic opposition of consolation and desolation. These two modes of relationship reveal to us where, and how, we are situated in our path to self-transcendence when we approach film as a contemplative act. For example, the film *Apocalypse Now* can bring us face to face with the levels of self-deception – personal, political, military, religious, and cultural – endemic in our society. Even the exuberant self-conscious indulgence of the film's production values reveal a fascinated disgust with evil that indicates a complicit entrapment with its subject. The film displays a clarity of reality that is both thrilling and sobering. It challenges us to examine the ways in which each of us copes with the chaos of a postmodern world. It shows us the broken myths by which we might try to make sense of, or control, that world. It brings us to a felt experience of entrapment in that world. How we spontaneously respond to that felt sense reveals to us where we are in regards to that entrapment. There may be the consolation that the truth of the world is revealed, that its lies have been exposed. There may be desolation if one sees the human effort as all that is possible in such a world.

Here it might be helpful to look at one of the reasons that St. Ignatius says we experience desolation. He holds that "God wishes to give us a true knowledge and understanding of ourselves so that we may have an intimate perception of the fact that it is not within our power to acquire or attain great devotion, intense love...or any other spiritual consolation" (#322). A film such as *Apocalypse Now* forces us to examine the limitations of trying to transform the world by purely human means.

The risk that God takes with us is to allow us to experience starkly the destructive consequences of the disorder of creation. Our response can be despair if we lose our sense of that larger context in which we live. God is merciful. God knows and loves us better than we know or love ourselves. God knows our basic nature is for union with God, and in that union for a life-giving mutual relationship. When we come to the limits of human possibility we discover the compassionate presence of a God who, in and through creation, maintains and supports our basic sense of life without denying us our freedom to try to destroy ourselves. If we can enter into our unredeemed history and face the disorder in our personal lives, the disorder in our family history, those in our societies and cultures, we discover the abiding presence of a divine Mystery whose creativity is to maintain our life and to transform the disorder of history into a new creation. It is in and through creation that creation is transformed. In the mysticism of St. Ignatius, which we share as we do the Spiritual Exercises, God enters creation and we discover God by our full participation in creation.

Participating in Creation

There are levels to this participation. Although we are part of creation, we can live as if we were separate from creation, or we can dominate creation, or we can live our lives as a purely unspiritual manifestation in creation. But we can go beyond these three levels. We can acknowledge the conflicting forces of good and evil in creation, and enter into the critical task of discerning good from evil and into the creative task of transforming evil into good. To perform these last three works we need to discover how we

are individually structured: that is, how God communicates with us and the ways in which we personally need God's help to become truly creative. We also need to know the traps we are prone to fall into that reinforce our narcissism and how to get the help we need to avoid those traps.

This is where film is invaluable. God communicates through our imagination, and in the exercise of our imagination we learn the language and the grammar of that communication. Coleridge says in his *Biographia Literaria* that human imagination incarnates the Divine creativity. Moreover, he would claim that as we perceive from our imaginations – or, as William Blake would put it, "I see through my eye, not with my eye" – the act of perception is essentially creative. Everything that is a human construct is a product of the imagination, and so manifests some trace of the divine creativity. Art raises that level of creative awareness to a self-conscious activity, and film combines the diverse manifestations of human creativity in sound, image, drama, and community in the most flexible and fluid ways to offer the most comprehensive shapings of space and time available to human consciousness. When we watch a film attentively, we participate in a form of contemplation that allows us to experience the imagination fully engaged in creating. We are not accustomed to thinking about it this way, but it is prayer.

There is a sentimental way of thinking about prayer: as an escape from the world or as a way of attaining God's unquestioning acceptance through affirming our own sense of self-identity. In effect, prayer gives us an entry into God's love. That love seeks out the damaged in creation – including us – to repair, console, and transform. Inasmuch as we participate in that love, we too are carried into the pain of the world and past the illusions of ourselves that contribute to the pain of the world. We become present to the source of creativity. By bringing our own creativity into a mutual engagement, we co-operate with God in showing compassionate mercy to the people and situations in our lives.

That engagement manifests itself in the act of contemplation. We contemplate God contemplating us. We can use Scripture or we can use film. In our culture today, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are venerated as classic documents that have helped shape our institutions. But they no longer give access to our spiritual myths and identity as they once did. It is not just the secularism of the times that has devalued them, or the ways that they have been used to justify destructive religious perspectives that have rendered their import suspect. The easy and present accessibility of multicultural spiritual traditions has relativized their importance. What has replaced them in the postmodern imagination is film.

Film represents the collective cultural unconscious of our time, and offers us a creative product that enters into a self-conscious dialogue with our personal stories and interests. That cultural unconscious, as a manifestation of creation – or, rather, of God's ongoing creativity with the productions of human longing and effort – is not a closed myth that we quarry for stories, form, and content, nor is it a broken myth of master narratives that we pillage for pragmatic ends. Rather, it is an open dynamic that holds the repositories of the creative effort, both positive and negative, to be one with God that has existed since the birth of time. The energies of that dynamic are not exhausted by human limitation, because it is the presence of the Spirit of God, restless and unquenchable until it transforms all into the creative image of God. Film shows us the spiritual

questing of humanity in our time in ways that are symbolic of, and appropriate for, the postmodern consciousness. We contemplate them, as the icons of our time, because they provide us with the language of our communication with God.

Contemplation and Spirituality

Contemplation is a spiritual exercise. Ignatian contemplation is structured to a particular end, which is to be disposed to receive the grace that we seek in a given prayer period. That grace is a particular response to our deepest desire, an ever-growing intimacy with God. At one time it may be a profound awareness of God's mercy holding us even when we, blinded by our disorders, sinned to find what we thought was love. At another time it may be such a personal bonding with Christ, the human manifestation of God, that we desire fully to be with him as he reveals to the world God's unceasing and compassionate mercy for creation. At still another time, it may be to follow the path of that divine love through the misery and destructiveness of this world. At the end of the Ignatian Exercises, we pray for the grace to be a part of that joyful labour that transforms our world.

We ask for these graces with the expectation that we will receive them in our prayer. At the end of that prayer we look back over what we have experienced to see where and how we have received them. Our understanding is that God desires to communicate with us and that by disposing ourselves to receive that communication, we signal to God our desire to accept this free and loving gift.

There are, as we well know, levels of gift. A gift can be offered and not received; a gift can be received and not accepted; that gift can be accepted but not opened; opened but not used; used but not shared; shared but not celebrated. The journey through the Exercises, using the world of contemporary popular film, carries us through the levels of gift to the place where we become one with the giver, one with what is given, and one with the creation to whom that gift is always offered.

(2) How to Use This Book

This book is a manual. Like all manuals, it will yield limited results if you read it without taking the time to engage in the process it lays out. Yet you can reap some benefits by simply reading a section when the spirit moves you and reflecting on it. More good will be achieved if you commit to preparing yourself to enter into the process. To that end you will need to set aside some time to read each section and reflect on the questions at the end of that section. This will prepare you to watch the film in question with a certain intention and focus; this controlled disposition results in viewing of the film becoming a contemplative act. There are more questions to reflect on after you have watched the film. Do not move to the next section until you have exhausted the riches contained in the present section. In Ignatian terms this is called "repetition." Repetition is not just repeating an exercise, but focusing on the points of the exercise that were significant in your prayer and reflection. You could think of this as a "zoom in," in which you pray and ponder over important aspects of a general view to reveal important insights and connections in your life. We recommend that you keep a journal of the significant moments you experience.

How to Prepare to Watch

Each section in this book is an exercise in prayer. Just as you prepare for physical exercise, you dispose

yourself for prayer. Find a time and a space where you can pray without being disturbed. Start by being intentional about what you want. This is called asking for the grace; each section presents the grace to be prayed for. Asking for a grace focuses your awareness. Then ask for the Spirit to help you receive the grace. Read the text slowly and reflectively, pausing where you feel moved. At the end of the reading, return to those points that moved you and allow them to be the entry into prayer. At the end of that prayer, go through the questions that follow the text, paying special attention to those questions that stir up something in you. Write in your journal what moved you in the prayer and the reflections.

All of this disposes you to the contemplative act of watching the film. The films we suggest are not intended to provide moral examples of the insights of the prayer; rather, they manifest those energies – both positive and negative – that you will experience as you enter into those meditations and contemplations set out by Ignatius in the Exercises. You enter the film as a contemplative act: you are to notice its effect on you – what it evokes in terms of consolation and desolation, the significant movements of the spirits within you.

You will not have time to do a whole section of reflection and film at one sitting. It is better to proceed at a slower pace, and watch the film only after you have absorbed the material for reflection. This disposition will allow you to encounter the full power of the film as a contemplative moment.

After Watching

After watching the film, it will be helpful to have a conversation with the Father, or with Jesus, or with a significant spiritual figure in your life about what occurred in the prayer period. You might wish to discuss something that moved you, or something that came up during the prayer, such as a memory, an association or a question. St. Ignatius, following Christ, addresses God as "Father." God, of course, is neither masculine nor feminine, but has qualities of a Father, a Mother, and much more than we can ever imagine. We are aware of the bias today of calling God "Father," but also of the intimate personal relationship that Christ has with the Mystery he calls Father; Ignatius has a similar relationship to this identification of God. It was on a pilgrimage to Rome that Ignatius had a vision at La Sorta where he beheld the Father telling the Son about Christ," I want you to put this man under your standard." For these reasons this book has used "Father" to maintain that relationship between that identification of God and the person doing the Exercises. If another term is more appropriate for you, feel free to use it.

Journalling this prayer helps you focus on the significant moments in the experience and on why they are significant. For the Ignatian method of discernment, it is important to pay attention to the times where you were moved either to consolation or desolation. (Consolation refers to those times when you are encouraged or feel alive and connected to God, to others and to yourself. Desolation is the opposite; it describes times when you are feeling apathetic, disinterested in what is good and life-giving, trapped and despairing.) For St. Ignatius, such moments reveal something significant about ourselves: through them God speaks to us, and so we need to return to them to discover what is being said. They reveal whether we are turned to God or away from God.

Discernment

Discernment is not that simple, however. When we are turned away from God, we might get feelings of pleasure from doing what is wrong. That is not consolation. Moreover, even if we are on the right path and are doing what is pleasing to God, we can still be given a false consolation: what we think and feel may be good, but it leads us away from the true good. We only know that it is a false consolation when we see the effects and discover that entering into that "good" feeling leads us to disturbed and ego-centred states. When you note in your journal your consolations and desolations, you also need to note where they lead you.

Consolations and desolations reveal to us "like bearings on a compass" where to go and how to behave if we truly are seeking to know God. If on our path to God we experience desolations, we know that we are encountering forces that seek to block our progress. It helps to examine what might be causing that disturbance. Does it come from an inappropriate attitude or understanding of our relationship to ourselves, to others or to God? Bringing that blockage to consciousness allows us to bring it to prayer. Then God's mercy can deal with whatever is hindering us from loving freely and joyfully. It might be a hurt in our past or an undeveloped aspect of ourselves that has become so much a part of our personality that we are unconscious of it, but that influences the way we see and feel and behave.

Consolations also help carry us closer to God. Ignatius defines consolation as being so inflamed with the love of God that we love in an ordered manner and so "can love no creature on the face of the earth for its own sake, but only in the Creator of them all" (#316). That love can move us to tears for our sins, and sorrow for the sufferings of any member of the community that is the Body of Christ. It is present when we relish things properly, when we grow in faith, hope and love and are attracted to all that leads to God filling our soul with peace and quiet. Consolation is not just feeling good. Sorrow and pain can also be signs of consolation. What is significant, for our spiritual awareness, is what the feelings mean and whether they orient us to seeking God.

So the first step in discernment is being able to identify the feeling. The second step is to become aware of what those feelings mean. As you gain more experience, you will find it easier to catch yourself more quickly. The third stage in discernment is seeing in which direction the state that manifests itself in a particular feeling is tending. This discernment is extremely personal. These are your feelings and no one else's. They indicate your particular language with God and God's own language with you. You might think of your feelings in prayer as the language lovers use with each other.

Journalling these states of consolation and desolation, together with what aroused them, allows you to come to a better understanding of yourself and of how you operate in the world. God's communication with you is always about how to live your life in a way that is more focused and more rooted in love. Journalling also allows you to see the patterns in your life; you will soon discover that the consolations, like desolations, are interconnected. They reveal to us our redeemed history and God's care for us even in those times when we might have felt far from God, or not even particularly concerned with spiritual things. Bringing this to our awareness enables us to appropriate more deeply God's constant mercy for us and communication with us.

The First Week: The Mercy of God

Ignatius' missionary thrust is to make all become aware that God loves us, and that God always and at every moment communicates with us. Ignatius even devised an examination of consciousness whereby at the end of every day we reflect on where we found consolation and desolation. He asks us to be grateful for moments of consolation and to reflect on moments of desolation to see why they happened and how we can prevent their occurrence. Ignatius believes that God wants us to be happy, and that God works in the world to bring us to our true self and to our true happiness.

To achieve that happiness we sometimes find ourselves having to make important decisions. The Exercises give us a process through which to make correct discernments. The Exercises are not techniques for discovering God's will, however. Rather, they dispose us to a true relationship with God and offer us a language by which God communicates with us. We can love someone and talk meaningfully with them but still make bad decisions. This is an existential truth. But that love and communication limit the possibility of making bad decisions. The Exercises make us prone to making good and life-giving decisions through the personal language of consolation and desolation.

The Second Week: Walking with God

Ignatius places decision-making in the Second Week of the Exercises, because people first need to experience radically that God loves them even though they have been and remain sinners. The First Week establishes a foundational openness to God; unless that happens, the decisions you make will be skewered by blindness to your true identity and to your true relationships with others and with God. By the end of the First Week, you will have come to an overwhelming sense of God's mercy in all aspects of your life – personal, communal, social and cultural – as well as a deep sense of how disorder on all levels of your existence corrupts your true awareness of your life. The liberation experienced in the First Week is a liberation to love, to be loving and to accept love. It is felt as a deep desire to live that love out in the world.

But how are we to do this? The Second Week of the Exercises introduces us to God's way of operating in the world as manifest in the presence and actions of Jesus Christ.

In that Second Week we are invited to journey with Christ and to pray for the grace of such an intimate knowledge of him that we desire only to love and to follow him. In the contemplations of that Week we can bring the decision we wish to make to the prayer and to discussions we have with God following the prayer. We check to see if in those moments of dialogue we are filled with consolation or desolation as we ponder our decision. Consolation means that we have made the right decision; desolation tells us that we are on the wrong track. But even in the contemplations themselves we can learn something useful. If we find God distant or uninvolved with us in those contemplations, we know something is wrong. Or if we find that we are acting, in those contemplations, in ways not consonant with Jesus' own activity, then we know we are on the wrong path. The liberated energies of our life are embodied in the decision we are trying to make; these shape the way we relate to the Christ as he journeys through his own earthly life. If those energies are consonant with the energies of the Christ, then we have consolation and the felt assurance that we are one with the Christ on mission. If there is disso-

nance, we have desolation and the signs of a bad decision.

The Third Week: A Passionate Love

In the decision-making process, that consonance and dissonance continue throughout the rest of the Weeks of the Exercises. If we are making the right decision we find that we can journey in union with Christ through his passion and death and resurrection. We suffer and are sad with Christ suffering. Indeed, at times we might even feel nothing, that same nothing we feel when we are at the last days of someone we love and the emotion that dominates our life is too deep even for feeling. With the wrong decision we find ourselves distant from the suffering, or we want to stop the suffering, or we are distracted from the main event by our own preoccupations and impose our own attitudes and perspectives on what is going on in the drama we are contemplating.

We are not to be masochistic or sadistic here. We do not delight in suffering for its own sake, nor do we take on that suffering to show just how good and holy we are. Christ did not choose his suffering. He chooses, as always, the Father and his path to the Father. The disorders of the world and of evil resist his manifestation of the Father as Compassionate Mercy by imposing a suffering designed to break his relationship or to eliminate him altogether. Similarly, the suffering we experience in the Third Week is one of identification with someone whom we love and follow, and with whom we now have the same path, the same spirit and the same passion.

The Fourth Week: A Transforming Life

That passion for the Father leads us to the Fourth Week. In this week we experience Christ's resurrection from the dead. The Christ does not raise himself from the dead; the Father manifests his love for him and reaches into the ultimate power of sin – death – and brings Christ, not back to life, but to a new level of creation, uncorrupted by evil: resurrection. Ignatius asks us, at this point in our spiritual journey, "to ask for the grace to be glad and rejoice intensely because of the great joy and the glory of Christ our Lord" (#221). We are not asked to experience joy because of what we have done, but rather to share Christ's joy and glory in his return to the Father. This is crucial for our discernment process, because here we can see if our decision has united us with the Christ. If it has, then we can experience the pure gift of Christ's joy; if it hasn't, then we will not.

The awareness of consolation and desolation can attune us more closely to the creative presence of God in our world and give us a personal language for listening to God. For Ignatius, God is never silent in the world, but manifests in every one of us no matter who or what or where we are. Ignatius would go even further and say that God uses everything to communicate with us. This book uses film because it is contemporary contemplation, and in contemplation one enters into communion with God. But this communication is not restricted exclusively to periods of prayer.

Ignatius, in the manual called the Spiritual Exercises, introduces the exercises themselves in the context of a daily examination of consciousness. In this examination he asks us to look at our day prayerfully at the end of it and see where we were consoled and where we experienced desolation. Even in the ordinariness of our day, God speaks. Ignatius suggests that we give praise for where, in the ordinary, we were consoled, and that we examine the moments of desolation to see what God is telling us. Ignatius' emphasis on the ordinary is echoed in the films we

have chosen. We could have chosen art films, or foreign films with a certain aesthetic sensibility, but instead we chose films that are available at the major commercial cinemas and video and DVD rental stores throughout the country.

The Key Concepts of Media Literacy

Reading these popular films using the techniques of spiritual literacy given in this chapter is not just a professional, academic or religious task. Such reading is based on the techniques of media literacy that we absorb by reflecting on what we see in the media culture we live in today. The following eight key concepts provide a theoretical base for all media literacy, and give a common language and framework for media discussion.

1. *All media are constructions.* This is arguably the most important concept. Media do not simply reflect external reality. Rather, they present carefully crafted constructions that reflect many decisions and are the result of many determining factors. Media literacy works towards deconstructing these constructions (i.e., taking them apart to show how they are made so that we do not take them literally). Our imaginative projects and our perceptions occur in the same way; the spiritual discipline of contemplation and reflection frees a person from being trapped by forces that determine what we see and imagine and spontaneously evaluate those seemingly natural acts.

2. *The media construct aspects of reality.* The media are responsible for the majority of the observations and experiences we use to build our personal understandings of the world and how it works. Much of our view of reality is based on preconstructed media messages with built-in attitudes, interpretations and conclusions. Thus the media, to a great extent, give us our sense of reality. In fact, the media also give us our sense of spirituality, but it is the dynamic nature of spirituality to refuse to be constrained by such constructions, just as it is the very nature of God to refuse to be constrained by creation.

3. *Audiences negotiate meaning in media.* If the media provide us with much of the material we use to build our picture of reality, each of us finds or "negotiates" meaning according to individual factors: personal needs and anxieties, the pleasures or troubles of the day, racial and sexual attitudes, family and cultural background, moral standpoint, and so on. Spiritual literacy examines the dynamics of that mediation in the light of our own consolations and desolations, which reveal in an intimate manner our relationship with the mystery we call God.

4. *Media messages have commercial implications.* Media literacy aims to encourage awareness of how the media are influenced by commercial considerations, and how these impinge on content, technique and distribution. Most media production is a business, and so must make a profit. Questions of ownership and control are central: a relatively small number of individuals control what we watch, read and hear in the media. This may seem Marxist, in that it suggests the economic basis for all media messages and for all cultural artifacts. Marxism is useful in unveiling the mystification of motives by using a hermeneutic of suspicion. But Marxism contains the drive to self-transcendence that underpins all human activity, including Marxist analysis itself. Spiritual literacy focuses on that basic drive to self-transcendence and on its satisfaction in the free gift of love by a creative and compassionate God.

5. *Media messages contain ideological and value messages.* All media products are advertising in some sense values and ways of life. The mainstream media convey, explicitly or implicitly, ideological messages about

such issues as the nature of the good life and the virtue of consumerism, the role of women, the acceptance of authority, and unquestioning patriotism. Our perceptions and imagination are shaped by these values. We can never be value free, and we can never escape the ideologies that can underpin those values. But we do not have to be imprisoned by those ideologies and values if we experience them as always inadequate manifestations of our true nature, which is to be in conscious union with the divine. Spiritual literacy builds on media literacy, for while media literacy can examine from a certain point of view the messages that are the media, it cannot examine itself. Spiritual literacy allows that examination and promotes the freedom that such an examination raises.

6. *Media messages contain social and political implications.* The media have great influence in politics and in forming social change. For example, television can greatly influence the election of a national leader on the basis of image. The media involve us in concerns such as civil rights, famines in Africa, and HIV/AIDS. They give us an intimate sense of certain national and global concerns so that we can imagine we have become Marshall McLuhan's global village. We should be hesitant about such a quick generalization, however. We all know that what we are being given is not all there is; we also know that we are unable to assimilate even that much. Similarly, we know that the media that is our imagination and our perception is also limited. Who we are is a mystery, and the implications of our actions in the world we live in are beyond our control. Inasmuch as our presence in the world is also media, we embody and represent social and political values. We are not just receptors of media messages, we are transmitters. Consider the enormous significance of designer labels and ideograms attached to our clothes, our food, our living styles. We embody mystery, but within the operative freedoms of our culture. How we choose to appropriate that freedom and manifest it in our lives becomes a matter of spiritual literacy. How others read that is media literacy.

7. *Form and content are closely related in media message.* As McLuhan noted, each medium has its own grammar and codifies reality in its own way. Different media will report the same event but create different impressions and messages. When we contemplate a gospel passage, our personality and the energies that compose our life shape the way that passage and encounter with Christ come alive. Even the representation of Christ is shaped by those energies. But it would be a serious mistake to think that such contemplations are just projections from our own personality. The contemplations are also the product of God's activity within the very intimacy of our psyche. In fact, God uses those images and energies to create a media message appropriate to our personal path. The form and content of what we experience in a contemplation reveals the unique communication and language that God has with us. The ability to read that communication is spiritual literacy

8. *Each medium has a unique aesthetic form.* Just as we notice the pleasing rhythms of certain pieces of poetry or prose, so we ought to be able to enjoy the pleasing forms and effects of the different media. You will notice in prayer that if it goes well, you have a sense of time passing without notice. If it does not go well, time drags; you are distracted, bored, irritable or wishing you could do something else. Personal prayer has an aesthetic in what is represented, in its modes of representation, in its narrative flow and editing. When we pay attention to our contemplations, we must look not only at the insight we think

is given, but at all the factors that compose that contemplation.

Clearly, contemplation is like film; film, viewed as a spiritual discipline, and contemplation are identical. Media literacy, at the level of spirituality, becomes the reflection tool for what occurs in our prayer. This book suggests using film, not to reinforce the particular insights of the Spiritual Exercises but as manifestations of the Exercises themselves. It sees media literacy as spiritual literacy, film as contemplation, and cinema as making available to a mass audience contemporary forms of prayer that discuss relevant issues and the quest for transcendence.

You can see, then, how what appears to be just a film becomes an instrument for a dialogue with God. The consolations and desolations we experience in that context alert us to the ways we are oriented, or not oriented, to God. Using a journal to note the different movements of the spirits within us, and the contexts in which those spirits are moved, sharpens our skills at learning our personal language with God. This makes us more flexible in walking through the currents of our world with freedom and integrity and a certain joy this world cannot give.

We invite you now to that freedom and that joy.

An Outline to Follow in Using This Book

Below we give an outline of the process we describe in this chapter. It will provide a handy guide until you become familiar with the structure of the prayer.

1. Make sure you have enough time for the exercise.
2. Find a quiet space and ask for the Spirit to help you make a good prayer.
3. Ask for the specific grace that is suggested in the introductory reflection.
4. Read the reflection slowly and carefully. Dwell on those sections, one at a time, that have moved you the most, either to a sense of well-being or to a sense of discomfort.
5. Invite God to enter into your prayerful journey through those sections.
6. Discuss with God what emerges in that journey and in those deliberations.
7. Use the questions provided at the end of the reflection to appropriate your experience or to enter further into prayer.
8. Journal the significant moments of this prayer experience.

   Note: In your journal you will want to write

   • the questions that moved you in each exercise and your response to them, in terms of both the introduction to the Exercises and the film,

   • what took place in prayer (the significant consolations and desolations), and

   • how you received the grace you requested.

When you feel you have appropriated the reflection, you are ready to watch the film.

A. Make sure you have enough time to watch the whole film at one sitting.

B. Make sure that you will not be disturbed or distracted.

C. Ask for the same grace as suggested in the introductory reflection.

D. Watch the film.

E. Examine yourself: Where in the film were you especially moved?

F. Use the questions provided for each film to appropriate better that contemplative experience.

Note 1: Each of the three sections of reflections that follow the movie contains a number of questions for reflection. You do not need to deal with all of these questions. Read the questions and respond to those that move you –in terms of attraction or repulsion.

Note 2: The questions are not intended to deal with every aspect of the film. There is just not enough space to do so. For example, a number of the movies are adaptations of short stories or novels. We have chosen not to deal with the issues of expectations about the story and/or the characters in such films.

G. Have a discussion with God about what moved you in the film and your reflections on the film.

H. Write in your journal what has been significant in this prayer period and reflection. It is helpful every so often to review all your journal entries to see if you can discern a pattern or a path.

I. At the end of every Week of the Exercises, reread carefully the journal entries for that Week. Try to summarize the overall movement of that Week. At the end of the Four Weeks, take time to reread all your journal entries. Summarize what has been given to you in your experience of journeying through the Exercises of St. Ignatius in this way.

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