

A Spiritual Guide

by George Kearney

Father John Dillon, SJ, paces back and forth across the altar with his head bowed slightly forward. He makes his way across the thick carpet slowly and silently, with his hands folded behind his back. Occasionally he glances towards the crucifix, which is illuminated by the only light in the chapel. "Every day I am trying to serve my brothers and sisters by helping them discover the beautiful path that Ignatius walked," he said. "The crucifix is where it all begins for me; that is the center." So, every morning at five o'clock, Dillon retreats to the chapel and begins his day beneath the crucifix.

This seemingly simple retreat is a far cry from the more intense thirty-day Spiritual Exercises that he has made at three different points in his career as a Jesuit. Yet the two experiences work to roughly the same end: they prepare him for his life of service. The Spiritual Exercises have been powerful and oftentimes pleasant prayer experiences for Fr. Dillon, but he sees them not as personal indulgences, but rather as necessary preparation for the work he tries to do on a daily basis.

"I want God to work in and through me," Fr. Dillon said, "but in order to do this, I have to want to open myself completely to what God wants for me and from me." Needless to say, this is not an easy task. "It's not always easy to serve. Oftentimes a desire for comfort or convenience compromises our awareness of opportunities to serve the needs of other people." For Fr. Dillon that is where the Spiritual Exercises come in, "the exercises help me to see God in all things, even in me. God created me out of love and I am going to try to resemble God and Christ by letting God work through me, by serving other people."

Fr. Dillon joined the Jesuits in 1952. Since his ordination in 1964 he has been working closely with the Spiritual Exercises both as a retreatant and a retreat director. He has spent the better part of his forty-eight year career working in campus ministry and retreat ministry. Presently he heads up the Bellarmine Retreat House in Barrington. He serves as the Chief Executive Officer of the center and the superior of the community. "In my work here," he said, "I am trying to live out the Exercises, that means an attitude of honesty, love, kindness, and a desire to serve."

The Exercises have also helped guide second year novice Cyril Whitaker to a deeper understanding of his commitment to service and his role as a servant. However, the means by which the Exercises worked in his life are somewhat different than Fr. Dillon's. So too, are the circumstances surrounding their careers. Whitaker joined the Jesuits as a 42-year old after 20 years of teaching at Moeller High School in Cincinnati. He began his 30-day retreat in January of 2000 uncertain about his decision to enter the Jesuits. "The retreat was a hard experience, but it was a very good time, a very powerful time," he said, "It



John Dillon, SJ



Cyril Whitaker, SJ

gave me an opportunity to look at the things I needed to work on; the things I needed to push out of my life in order to let God in."

For Whitaker the retreat was a journey towards greater self-understanding. "I'm a terrible perfectionist. I knew that before I went on the retreat. I wanted everything I did to be perfect. I liked being in control. Before the retreat I had never prayed to give that up, because I hadn't seen a real problem with being a perfectionist. But I realized, if I am in control, God is not in control." This realization compelled Whitaker to pray ardently that he might be able to give up his proclivity towards perfection and control.

In the months following the retreat Whitaker has been calm, and more at ease. "I am less demanding of myself now, and more understanding." Much of the value of the retreat he says "is coming to understand and accept who one is in relation to God. Because one can't serve as thoroughly or selflessly if one doesn't know who one is."



Patrick McGrath

Patrick McGrath, 34, entered the Chicago Province Novitiate program this year. Pat has a BA in government from the University of Notre Dame and an MDiv from the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, CA. During the past 6 years Pat has worked at St. Ignatius College Prep as director of community service and more recently as chair of the Religious Studies department. He also taught religion classes at Chicago's Cathedral High. Pat has been very active at his local parish, St. Clement's, having served as lector, Eucharistic minister, and as a member of the parish council.





Andrew Wawrzyn, SJ

Whitaker's deepened understanding of himself coupled with his extensive prayer in the wake of the retreat seem to have quelled his doubts and convinced him to remain a Jesuit, "A month ago I sold my last car. I had been hanging on to it and now it's gone."

Andrew Wawrzyn, SJ, a scholastic working on his MA in philosophy at Fordham University touched on the significance of The Spiritual Exercises when he said, "They (the Exercises) are, in my opinion, the most significant

apostolate or ministry we do as Jesuits." Wawrzyn, who in his four years as a Jesuit has made the 30-day retreat and two eight day retreats, added, "I can easily say that my prayer life has deepened significantly because of the Exercises."

"The Spiritual Exercises," according to Wawrzyn "have become the way we deepen our relationships with Christ as Jesuits." This relationship has helped him to a profound understanding of his sinfulness and God's resilient love. "My relationship with Christ has revealed to me that despite my sinfulness, God loves me and wants me to help in ministering to God's people. This experience has led to a welling up within me of a desire to spread this message. In other words I want to tell others that God loves them too."

The significance of the Exercises is that they are inherently related to action, service, and life. The Jesuits are not a cloistered order. The Exercises are not prayer for the sake of prayer or meditation. Rather, it is prayer for the world. Wawrzyn adds, "In order to achieve the kind of Christian ideals, like justice, that we talk about so much; we need to have our lives centered on Christ, since we are always trying to pattern our lives after his."

The retreat is just the beginning of this process, according to Whitaker, who said, "The Spiritual Exercises go on, even after the retreat ends they go on." These three men and their Jesuit counterparts across the world try to live out the Exercises every day in the work they do for other people. Fr. Dillon sees the retreats as "progress reports," that measure the way in which they are progressing through their lives. In reality the Spiritual Exercises are the linchpins in these different men's progressions towards Christ, towards keeping him at the center of what they do and who they are to become as people and as Jesuits. ■



The Foundation of a Jesuit's Spiritual Life

THE EXERCISES are the foundation of a Jesuit's spiritual life. Jesuit novices make the 30-day retreat at some point during the two-year novice program.

The Exercises usually include several hour-long prayer periods each day focusing on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and other points for meditation and contemplation. The retreat usually involves a withdrawal from everyday events, such as watching TV or reading newspapers.

Although the retreat is referred to in terms of "weeks," those weeks do not necessarily correspond to seven-day periods. For some, a first "week" could be almost fifteen days long, and the next three "weeks" encompass the next fifteen days. The first week is a reflection on the self.

Jesuits see the Exercises as a "school" of prayer. Novices are encouraged to try prayers of reflection, meditation, and contemplation, as well as repetitions of all the prayers. Experimenting and changing help the retreatant to find the most comfortable ways of prayer. For Ignatius the prayer of contemplation, putting oneself in the scene through the use of the five senses, provided a key to discovering God's ways.

Another goal of the Exercises is to remove the barriers between oneself and God so that the Spirit speaks to oneself directly.

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