

The Spiritual Exercises and Ecology

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Introduction

The Spiritual Exercises can further our contemplative experience of Creation, while also addressing the extent and underlying causes of the ecological crisis. The Spiritual Exercises also can inspire hope-filled healing action for the Earth.

Creation and the Exercises

Ignatius refers to God as "Creator and Lord." We humans are creatures. Creation is an expression of God. We can have no knowledge of God apart from the created world. The third rule of discernment states that consolation is "an interior movement . . . aroused in the soul by which it is inflamed with the love of its Creator and Lord, and as a consequence, can love no created thing on the face of the earth for its own sake, but only in the Creator of them all" [Spr. Ex., 316]. When the retreatants are praying over their sin, they are encouraged to "cry in wonder accompanied by surging emotion" as they contemplate the fact that God through the Universe, has sustained and served them in life even though they sinned [Spr. Ex. 60]. Redemption is set then, within the context of Creation.



*Pokeweed, Phytolacca Americana*¹

Three-fold relationship. The 1999 Jesuit document on ecology, "We live in a broken world," states that for Ignatius, there is a three-fold relationship of subjects among God, humans and the rest of Creation.² In Genesis 2, Adam (human) was created from Adamah (topsoil) and so is permanently linked to God and Earth. In Father Kolvenbach's address at the opening of the Arrupe College in Harare, Zimbabwe, he insisted that these relationships are "so closely united that a person cannot find God unless he finds him through the environment and, conversely, that his relationship to the environment will be out of balance unless he also relates to God."³ We are not to relate to the created world or to God as something out there, as something completely different from ourselves, but with the intimacy of a dynamic, personal relationship that has an intrinsic worth independent of any utilitarian worth for humans. We are beings that affect others and are in turn influenced by others.

The Bookends of the Exercises. The "three-fold relationship of subjects" is particularly evident in the Principle and Foundation and the Contemplation on Love. Ignatius establishes that humans are to use the rest of

Creation inasmuch as it will lead them to God, that is, "to help us praise, reverence and serve God." Freedom is the gift sought, and this involves the ordered attachment to creatures as well as humans. This seemingly anthropocentric notion of Creation is tempered by the Contemplation on Love. In the Contemplatio, Creation is both the source of God as well as a pathway to God. God gives God's self to me in Creation. God dwells in Creation. God labours and works in Creation, and in so doing redeems me. We experience the goodness of God in and through the creatures around us.

The Four-Week Dynamic

The four-week dynamic leads retreatants to a deeper experience of ecological sin, while nurturing their experience of God in Creation.

The First Week. The root of the ecological crisis is a spiritual problem. Ecological destruction is the result of a dysfunctional relationship between us and God and the rest of Creation, that is, a disorder in the three-fold relationship. The material created world is also a spiritual world exhibiting the presence of the Creator. This may not be recognized by many people. In Harare, Father Kolvenbach stated that the ecological crisis is a "denial of the relationship with God."⁴ This point is reiterated in "We live in a broken world": "At the origins of the ecological crisis is denial – in deed even more than in word – of the relationship with God."⁵ The ecological crisis exists because we fail to recognize Creation as God's dwelling place, enabling us to enslave Creation with our sin. Not recognizing God in Creation – or in anything else – is also a flight from responsibility, a refusal to be engaged by God through the world.

The First Week is the correct place to begin dealing with this spiritual problem. In the first week, Ignatius has us contemplate the experience of sin in our lives, within the context of a loving and merciful God. The various aspects of the crisis are the content for prayer during the first week. We pray over the reality and extent of the crisis. We get in touch with our participation in this "ecological sin," as individuals and as members of a society. We examine how helplessly we are caught in the web of social ecological sin. The grace sought during the First Week is sorrow for our sin, but also the experience of being loved by God in spite of the sin. We experience a loving God in the midst of the crisis, in the midst of my sin.

This prayer can be difficult. Many emotions may be experienced during this prayer. Denial may be one, and the retreatant may wish to debate the reality of aspects of the ecological crisis such as climate change, pollution, and so on. The director would invite the retreatant to "take it to prayer." Prayer is not an intellectual exercise. The retreatant is encouraged to listen to what God is saying about the crisis.

Guilt and/or despair may also be experienced by the retreatant. Again, the retreatant is encouraged to go back to prayer and experience the saving love and mercy of God. In spite of our sin, God through the Universe does not condemn us but sustains us, and continues to love us. We are loved sinners.

The Second Week. After experiencing the extent of ecological sin in the First Week, we then proceed to grow in intimacy with the person of Jesus. We experience the life of the earthly Jesus through praying the Gospel stories. We experience Jesus who taught as he walked outdoors. We seek "intimate knowledge" of Jesus who became a part of the Earth, so that we may love him more. We pray the contemplation on the Incarnation and realize that God has become a creature within the womb of Mary. We pray with Jesus, who went to quiet places to pray, who prayed in the desert, in the garden, by the riverside and had a

¹ Courtesy to Al Fritsch SJ, www.earthhealing.info

² "We live in a broken world." *Promotio Iustitiae* 70, 1999, p. 21.

³ Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, "Our Responsibility for God's Creation," address at the opening of Arrupe College, Jesuit School of Philosophy and Humanities, Harare, Zimbabwe, August 22 1998. (Ottawa: The Jesuits Centre for Social Faith and Justice, 1999), 12.

⁴ Kolvenbach, "Our Responsibility for God's Creation," 13

⁵ "We live in a broken world", 27.

mystical experience on the mountaintop. We pray with Jesus, who experienced God by paying attention to the lilies of the field, or to a grain of wheat that must die.

In the Second Week, we also can grow in intimacy with the Cosmic Christ, present within Creation. The Cosmic Christ, present in the beginning (John 1:1), is the Word of God incarnate. It is the Christ of Paul, the "image of the unseen God . . . everything visible and invisible" (Colossians 1:15). The Cosmic Christ, for Ignatius, is "Creator and Lord" – the Creator, but also in a personal relationship with the Universe. The Cosmic Christ is the Omega Point of Teilhard de Chardin, drawing all of Creation to Christ's self. The entire cosmos is the habitat of God/the Cosmic Christ. We develop a dynamic, personal relationship with Creation as the embodiment of God, the Cosmic Christ who dwells in Creation. As we pray, we experience the revelation of the Cosmic Christ, the life of God and God's love.

In the Second Week we pray, then, with the Earth. We experience the healing presence of God in the Earth, the ability of the Earth both to provide healing for humans and to heal itself. The healing presence of Jesus in the gospels is an expression of the healing presence within the Earth. We experience wonder when we pay attention to a rejected weed and come to understand that it has a purpose in Creation. We might be attentive to the complexity of the soil that we walk over without thinking. We prayerfully feel the texture of the soil examining aspects of the biological community within the soil. As we experience the diversity and complexity of the ecosystem beneath our feet we cry in wonder at the beauty and magnanimity of the cosmic Christ in Creation.

The Third Week. During the Third Week, we experience God labouring for us within Creation, the suffering of the Earth that is an expression of the suffering Christ. The Cosmic Christ continues to suffer in the poor – the pain of the hungry, the pain of a person suffering from disease is the pain of Jesus. The abandonment felt by the lonely is the abandonment of Jesus on the cross. The fish dying in a polluted stream express the suffering of Jesus. A garbage dump is our Calvary. In the midst of the poor, in the midst of the ecological mess, in the midst of the community of people, Jesus lives. Jesus is suffering in the suffering of the people and of the Earth.

"The cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor are one," state the Canadian bishops.⁶ This cry is the cry of Jesus on the cross. Poor people express the suffering of Jesus and articulate the pain of an Earth in ecological decline. In the Third Week we become attentive to the cry of the Earth. We experience the suffering of Christ in the garbage heaps, in the pollution of our cities, in the dead soil of an industrial farm, in the fish dying in the rivers, in the dry fields suffering from the effects of climate change. God suffering in people, God suffering in the Earth is the experience of the Third week. We seek the grace of sorrow and compassion because the sin of the world continues to cause the suffering of Jesus.

The Third Week can also be an occasion for us to attend to the importance of sacrifice and the reality of death. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is an expression of the sacrificial aspect within the Earth. Two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom forsake their individuality and become water - something new and greater than the combination of the parts. The instinctive (and loving) care of animals for their young is another expression of this sacrificial nature – the giving of one's self in love.

We also get in touch with the reality, and the beauty of death. People of some cultures often avoid death. We can also seek only a romantic or sentimental experience of nature, and ignore the presence of death all around us. During the Third Week, we acknowledge death, the death that leads to new life. We experience the beauty of God in the sacrificial dying of a deer or farm animal, for the sake of life. We pay attention to the life that is given to me when I eat a plant that has died so that I may eat. Sometimes this death can be messy and tragic, as it was on the

cross. However, in the midst of the mess, we prayerfully experience the presence of God.

The Fourth Week. The life that comes from death is the material of the Fourth Week. We experience the life of Christ, symbolized by the empty tomb or the empty cross when we pay attention to the resilience of people who live in very difficult circumstances, to the life that comes from a grain seed that must die, the life of spring or of the rainy season, the life active around a fallen tree liberating nutrients for the plants around it, the life given to us as we eat a fruit or vegetable. We experience the life that was experienced by Mary Magdalene outside the tomb in the garden or by the disciples as they walked the road to Emmaus. We recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread. We experience God's liberating power in the healing power of the Earth. .

During the Fourth Week we may wish to contemplate the 13.7 billion year story of the Universe and prayerfully experience that the story is about life. The story includes both death and sacrifice. God brings forth life from this. If it were not for the extinction of the dinosaur we would not have evolved as we did.

Death, destruction, pain is not the end of the story. The story of Jesus does not end with Calvary. During the Fourth Week we seek the grace to rejoice intensely because of the great life that has been given to us. We also experience the liberating hope that comes from this life.

We end the Spiritual Exercises by reviewing our experience in "The Contemplation on Love." We review how God labours for us in Creation and dwells in Creation. We reflect on the gifts we have received from Creation. As Ignatius reminds us, our response of love is shown by our action. We therefore spontaneously offer ourselves to the Creator and Lord for the work of redemption within Creation. We act with hope.

We leave the retreat cognisant of the grave crisis in which we live. Our experience of the love and life of God in the Universe has perhaps increased the pain we feel over the crisis. Yet, our pain is within the context of the experience of the resurrection, of the life that comes from death. We are then able to respond with hope and in love, committing ourselves to participate in the healing of the Earth. Guilt or fear for the future is foreign to such commitment.

Conclusion

The Spiritual Exercises provide an instrument for people to experience the sacred within the Universe. The Exercises bring about conversion, healing our relationships with God and the Earth. We experience the effects of our broken relationships within the context of a loving God, expressed in the Earth as the Cosmic Christ. When we confront the pain of suffering and death, we find God. In the regenerative power of the earth, in the resilience of people, we experience joy as we experience the risen Christ.

The experience of the Exercises leads to action for the sake of the Earth, for the sake of God, action that participates in the healing nature of Earth and is the hope-filled expression of the love that was received.

In this time of ecological crisis, the gift of hope is perhaps the greatest gift of the Exercises. The Exercises provide a nurturing method to deal with the reality and extent of the ecological crisis in a way that does not leave the person in the pain. Otherwise, guilt, despair, and paralysis would be understandable reactions.

Our experience of ourselves as creatures enables us to realize that we are not gods. We depend on God's liberating grace. We have experienced the love of God in and through Creation. We share the love we feel; we give ourselves to others, to the earth community. Love manifests itself in deeds. The experience of the resurrection, of the liberating life, nurtures our faith, liberating our hope. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Our loving action is permeated by hope, enabling us to express the healing presence of the divine in the Earth.⁷

⁶ Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, Social Affairs Commission, "You love all that exists . . . all things are Yours, God, lover of life." Oct 4, 2003, p.5

⁷ For a more detailed consideration of this topic cf. James Profit, S.J. "Spiritual Exercises and Ecology," *Promotio lullitiae* 82, 2004, 6-11.