

The Rev. Michael J. Graham, S.J.
President, Xavier University
Academic Day Address
October 3, 2006

The Influence of the Spiritual Exercises on Six Dimensions of Jesuit Education

I thought what I might do on this Day is to step back and describe to you how I see, and how Jesuits have seen, characteristically, the larger backdrop against which each of us does what we do day by day and what collectively all of us do together. That thing which sifts out of all our activities that we hope will in a very powerful way enrich the hearts and minds of our students and send them out into lives changed, lives that are better, more valuable, more worth living than they would have been had they not been here.

So what I want to do is really talk about six dimensions of Jesuit education. The way I'm going to do it actually is look at one of the founding documents of the Society of Jesus, the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola, and read them, as it were, not as a retreat document but as an educational document. What hints or clues about the educational enterprise might we draw from the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius? If, to say it another way, the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola were the only document we had that came from him, how might we think of the educational enterprise in which we are engaged together in light of that document?

Let me do two things up front. One is to state my conclusions first. The other is to make some background comments on the Spiritual Exercises themselves. I'll do that part first. It's important for us all to understand that the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola, though the founding document of the Jesuits in many ways, is the sort of document which helps to create the animating spirit that allowed Ignatius to draw around him a small group of companions at the University of Paris and then go on to found the Society. It's important to understand the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius were written by a layperson for laypeople. His whole design was to find some way of helping the people around him in his era sort of be able to sense the presence of God in their lives such that they could make decisions from moment to moment about how they might live their lives. He sought to shape through the laypeople that he touched what he would come later to call "contemplatives in the midst of action." He knew that people would live busy lives but how could he help them acquire the skills to become somehow contemplative in the midst of that? To be able to step back a couple of steps from the details of their lives so as to reflect on the lives they lead in the light of God's grace? So, we are the heirs, really, of that tradition.

To do the other thing and state my conclusions up front, let me give you six dimensions, as it were, that as I read the Exercises seem to kind of sift out from them. That the education that we offer our students in a University that calls itself Jesuit must be holistic and integrated, must be exacting but adaptable, must be reflective, must be ongoing, must be practical but located within a broad horizon, must be finally ordered to something greater. Let me go through these, but let me start with the last one **first** because indeed it's the most important of them. Early on in the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius states something that he calls the Principle and Foundation. In some ways it is kind of an early mission statement before mission statements became all the rage. He gives this to people who are making the Exercises early on; asks them to walk around chewing on it see if it somehow touches a chord somewhere inside them and names something for them that might be true. It goes like this:

“The human beings are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord and by this means save their soul. The other things on the face of the earth are created for us to help us in attaining this end for which we are created. Hence we are to make use of the things of the world in so far as they help us in the attainment of our end and must rid ourselves of them insofar as they prove a hindrance. Therefore we must make ourselves indifferent to all created things as far as we are allowed free choice and are not under any prohibition. Consequently, as far as we are concerned, we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor to dishonor, a long life to a short life. The same holds for all other things. Our one desire and our one choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we were created.”

It's important to note that Ignatius does not believe that in some way sickness is better than health or poverty is better than riches or dishonor is better than honor, merely, that with respect to our position, we should not unduly seek those things in and of and for themselves. Rather these are, as it were, tools through which God may work with us and through which we may find ourselves walking our way back to God. It is that relationship with God that should be the kind of compass, if you will, that we use to chart the course of our lives. So this mission statement that he gives to people is really intended to give them some place to begin.

The thing that is not only what you are shooting for ultimately, but knowing what you are shooting for ultimately gives you some sense of what your point of departure is and allows you to know along the way if you are going in the direction you have set for yourself. A question that I would pose is: To what end ought education be directed here at a Jesuit Catholic University? What ought to be the purpose of that enterprise in which you and I are engaged?

The second principle: that education should be practical but situated within a very broad horizon. That horizon is clear. It's that Principle and Foundation that forms the surrounding arena against which, within which, people make the decisions that they make. Early on in the Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius gives us a subtitle, which goes like this,

“The purpose of the Spiritual Exercises is the conquest of self and the regulation of one's life in such a way that no decision is made under the influence of any inordinate attachment.”

By inordinate attachment, he means the clinging to something in and of itself, not for the end for which we are made. An ordinate attachment is something we hold on to because it carries us in the direction for which we are made, towards the realization of who we are as creations of God, made to praise, reverence and serve God. So what he wants us to do is, along the course of this month, find some kind of inner freedom to discover a way that allows us to make good choices such that in the various choices we make we make them so as to move toward fundamental purpose of us.

Now when he says that the purpose of the exercises is to regulate our lives so that no decision is made under the influence of any inordinate attachment, he understands that phrase “no decision” in at least two different ways. One of the ways is that Ignatius, through his own experience and the experience of those to whom he gave the exercises, discovered people often have a very big decision they are about to make. Will they go this way fundamentally with their lives or that way? What is the basic vocation they would choose? Nowadays, people who would be Jesuits make the Exercises twice usually in the course of their lives. Their first time is very early on, not too long after they've entered the Order. The purpose of the Exercises at that time is to help them reflect on the choice to be a Jesuit or not. So the big decision that faces us early on that the Exercises are geared to help us understand is this fundamental vocational choice. But Ignatius

understands that phrase “no decision” in a far, far larger and more important way, as well. Ignatius believes that moment by moment in each choice we face, each decision we come to, we have the opportunity either to affirm the fundamental meaning of our lives as he presents it in the Principle and Foundation, or not, so any choice or decision is really a choice and decision in part to ratify or deny our kind of fundamental self in some fashion. His goal is as he said then freedom so as to make those decisions wisely and well as best we can with the information we have in front of us, moment by moment by moment, such that it isn’t simply in the big moments of our lives, the big decisions and so on, but in those smaller, quieter decisions each of us face all the time, we continue to move toward who it is that we were made and what it is we are meant to be.

We might think nowadays that we could substitute words for where he talks about inordinate attachments - we could substitute words like biases, prejudices, ignorance, unexamined presuppositions and so on, and so frame a question for ourselves about what we do here this way, “What kind of education is so broadly freeing, freeing of people from their biases, prejudices, preconceptions, and so on, that it best equips people to face any particular choice or circumstance or situation or decision they will make or face? For ultimately that is the most practical form of education, not one that merely prepares people for a particular occupation.

The third principle is that education should be ongoing, although we have to kind of phrase this in a particular way since most parents, I’m sure, would not want their children to be in college for ever and ever and ever. The education that our students receive should in some way prepare them to continue learning throughout their lives. If you look at the Exercises and try to understand how this might come from it, it sort of flows from the previous point. Any decision we make, any circumstance we confront, needs ultimately to be referenced against the ultimate horizon of the Principle and Foundation which forms that mission of the Exercises overall.

Well how do you do that? How is it that Ignatius says it is possible for us somehow to sense or know or intuit the right choice to make within the particulars of any particular situation? It gets back to two important words for Ignatius and the Jesuit tradition that comes from the Exercises - consolation and desolation. The best illustration of those is Ignatius’ own from his autobiography as he narrates his own conversion. He reminds us that what happened is that this young dashing courtier who loved the life of the court was in a battle, found his leg shattered by a cannonball and sent home to the family castle to convalesce. He wanted to read the typical kinds of chivalrous literature popular in the period but unfortunately for him, more fortunately for us, there were only two books at home – The Life of Christ and The Lives of the Saints. Not to be deterred, however, he found himself putting the books down from time to time and beginning to fantasize about the life of the courtier he would take up again once he got his leg repaired and he could go back to swordplay and dancing and all the rest of that stuff. But every now and then, he would find himself putting the book down and fantasizing about leading a life of abnegation and penance and austerity and so on like the saints about whom he read. To undertake the kinds of penances they imposed upon themselves and make them sharper still. What he began to notice along the way was that when he had the first fantasy, afterward, he felt listless, dull, tired, distracted. After he had the second kind of fantasy, he felt a kind of inner peace. From this basic insight, that he felt within himself a kind of desolation or consolation as he came to call it, he began to believe that in us already is a kind of tool put there somehow that points us in the right direction.

The question in a way is how can we sharpen our interior sense of that such that we are able to make good choices moment by moment? To sort of have some sense of consolation at the

moment as we confront the particular choices before us? Go that way - how would I feel, go that way - how might I feel? The question I would pose for us here at Xavier University has to do with lifelong learning. What skills, experiences and so on do we need to help teach our students so that they will be prepared to continue to learn? For to be sure the jobs that they will face in this very complicated world will demand that they go on learning and it would be imprudent of us to release them into those futures unless we release them with the skills they would need to continue learning to do the things that would be before them to do. That, to be sure, is true. But in one way, of course, you and I think about the success we would like to see in our students in far, far larger ways than simply success in a job. Indeed we would all agree if that is the only kind of success our students experience in later life we will somehow be disappointed in that. The success we would like to see them enjoy is a far, far larger success. We would like to see them gain some touchstone experience of themselves perhaps while they are here. How can they come to get a glimpse of themselves when they are at their very best? When do they reflect on themselves and discover themselves fulfilled and happy and doing work that makes them whole in some way? When do they find themselves and all their talents and all their gifts truly brought together and engaged in a very powerful way in the way that the work that we give them here to do can help facilitate? Can we help provide students with this touchstone experience of themselves such that they will be motivated to go on learning in all the various ways that we would like to see them continue to learn all the days of their lives?

Fourth: Education depends upon reflection. The full Spiritual Exercises are made in about a month. That month is divided into 4 weeks, each week is divided into days, each day is divided not into hours exactly but what Ignatius calls meditations. Those meditations have a kind of structure to them. The first part is a kind of input. He gives you something to consider. It may be an image he creates for you, or a script, often enough, most usually it's a passage from scripture, usually the life of Christ. The second piece is an imaginative reconstruction of what the scene is. For example, in contemplating the Nativity of Christ, he invites you to walk along with Joseph and Mary and the donkey, and go from inn to inn to inn and be disappointed, and then find your way to the stable, and Ohh! there's the baby, and all this. In the third part, he asks you to step back and talk to the characters in this play that has unfolded in your mind or maybe to talk to God out of this experience. He will often enough invite retreatants to repeat the meditations they have made to see if there's anything else there, to pick up details that may have escaped them the first time. And one of the tools he invites people to use in these so-called repetitions is the application of senses - How does the hay look? How do the cows smell? How do the sheep sound? - as a way to engage all of a person's faculties in entering into this scene in a very absorbing and compelling sort of way.

There are also within the Exercises a set early on of paragraphs that are designed, not for the retreatant going through the Exercises, but for the director helping the retreatant go through the Exercises. These so-called annotations are hints or sort of tips that Ignatius has discovered to be helpful in his own experiences of giving the Exercises and he passes them along to future generations of directors for their own consideration. In one of those annotations he says something that's very interesting. He urges the director to get out of the way and allow the Creator to deal directly with the creature. Ignatius knows something very important - that the director of the retreat is merely a facilitator. The retreat itself happens as it were within the heart, mind, soul of the retreatant in some kind of magic sort of way almost. The retreat director can facilitate that process, but ultimately it is an invisible process at work within the retreatant himself or herself. The question for us is how might we best muster all the resources

we have as an educational community in order to produce this invisible something that happens within our students? We can see the effects of it, but the thing itself remains somehow a mystery. The penny drops, we know it has, but it happens within them, doesn't it, in a very rich, mysterious and wonderful way? How can we help our students become more adept at that penny-dropping moment? How can we prepare them to be people to whom and for whom that experience just keeps on happening? That they open themselves to the horizon of learning that could be theirs and somehow leave this place more apt to have this invisible wonderful reflective experience happen within them that we call education than when they arrived here?

Fifth: Education should be exacting but adaptable. Go back to the annotations again and you'll discover that Ignatius is of two very distinct and very different minds with regard to the Exercises in one kind of way. On the one hand he is very much a person of the early modern era, all about systemization and so on and creating a mechanized order, you go through things. He insists the director monitor very closely the things that are going on in the life of the retreatant. If nothing is going on there, you are supposed to make all kinds of pointed inquiries: Are you spending the appointed time in prayer or not? And if you're not spending the hour, the exact hour, then you need to spend even more time besides so as to make sure you're putting in the good faith effort that's required. So he's very clear that there is a method here, a sequence. You're not supposed to go to the second week until the first week is done. On the other hand, Ignatius understands that there are profound human differences that need to be taken into consideration. So, over and over again in the Exercises, to some degree, but especially in a later document, the Constitutions, you find the phrase that "adaptations must be made with respect to people, places, and situations." It's perhaps the most common repeated phrase in the Constitutions themselves. The retreatant will take four weeks, more or less. Some people will take a little longer on the first week, others will zip through it. The second week may similarly expand or contract. If you find this works, fine, go with it; if it isn't working, well, unless it's important, you can let it go; there are certain touchstone experiences along the way that must be had, but it's up to the director to kind of figure out how the retreatant should go through them. We get a glimpse here of the genesis of something which will come to be called *cura personalis*, the care of the person; a valuing of the human person at the center of Jesuit enterprises, whether the governance within the Order itself or the experience, the tone that ought to mark our interactions with other people. This *cura personalis* ought to be at the center of all that we do. So the question is: How can an education at a Jesuit University have it both ways – have unwavering norms and absolute expectations for excellence and yet always be prepared to make the necessary adaptations according to people, places, and situations, because our students are always their own particular individuals with their own particular gifts and we need to moderate what we do if we are to get the best that we seek out of them?

And finally, education should be holistic and integrative. To go back to the meditations, I described in some way what goes on in them. There is an underlying faculty psychology that Ignatius simply assumed was part of the intellectual fabric of his day. The soul is divided into three parts: the memory, the understanding, and the will, and so the meditations touched each of these various faculties as a way of engaging the whole person. And then there's the business of repeating part of the meditations and applying the senses to them so as to drive them and the experience of them even deeper. Why do that? Well, because Ignatius believes that the problem is not understanding what the right thing to do is, it's having the will to choose the right thing. That's a very different issue, indeed. It's one thing to understand the right; it's another to choose it. Ignatius' understanding of the mechanism that triggered the will to make the correct choice is that it was centered in the affections, what we might call the emotions or the heart. The repetitions were designed to drive the experience of the meditations deeply down inside a person

so that they would touch the heart in such a way that they would be motivated always to make the right choice. And so the question that presents itself for us is: Is it enough in an educational experience to be concerned with what Ignatius would call understanding alone? What about the will, what we might today call the heart, which is what governs choice? How do you educate that as well as the understanding? For certainly both are necessary. None of us would want to see well-intentioned but completely clueless students of ours going out into the world to do a heck of a lot more harm than good. They need to have a very well-educated mind if that well-educated heart is to make the difference that would make a difference in our world; yet they would not make that difference unless their hearts were somehow educated, as well.

In sum, I'm arguing today that if you look at the Exercises, a certain kind of portrait of the Jesuit educational enterprises presents itself. It is ordered to a greater good beyond itself. It is practical but located within a broad horizon of human mission and situation and therefore is the most practical thing. It should be ongoing. It should be based upon reflection. It should be exacting but adaptable. It should be holistic and integrative. What I've discovered along the way here in the course of my time over many years is that people here find different ways of doing exactly these sorts of things as they engage their students and one another as they go around. I think as well there's another good Jesuit principle – the *magis*. The *magis* refers to the more, the greater, in the sense that the destiny that is front of us is always larger because God is always larger than our own imaginations. All of us and this enterprise itself, no matter how much we might bend ourselves towards contributing in the way proper to us and in a way that we are comfortable with, towards this overall mission of the institution, can always find ways of doing what we do better. That includes, first and foremost, me.

But it would not be too facile to conclude this talk by reminding you of the words that I say often and if I don't say them, others do, and that is the mission of this institution that will perhaps have a resonance because of this talk that formerly it did not have. That "the mission of Xavier University is to serve society by forming students intellectually, morally, and spiritually, with rigor and compassion, towards lives of solidarity, service, and success."

Thank you very much for what you do, day by day, in all kinds of ways, sung and unsung, that make this mission come true in the place where it matters most - in the hearts and the minds of our students.