

# Opening words for the retreatant

Welcome to the retreat in everyday life: *Grace upon Grace: Savouring the Spiritual Exercises through the Arts*. The book is presented as a series of spiritual exercises to be followed daily. You will have your own reasons for wanting to pray these exercises. Ignatius of Loyola<sup>1</sup> who wrote the original *Spiritual Exercises*<sup>2</sup> expressed their value and intention when he said that they were exercises to free a person ('soul') from **disabling tendencies**<sup>3</sup> in order to live fully in loving communion with God, and hence act from that abundant love [1].<sup>4</sup>

## *Spiritual direction*

If you can find a **spiritual director** to accompany you through the Exercises, you will be able to share and discuss anything which is important to you. While some spiritual directors, who are also givers of the Exercises, confine the conversation to what has happened in your **prayer**, it is important to find a director who will also welcome conversation about what is happening in your life. You and your spiritual director together will seek to know the direction to which God is drawing you.

## *The word 'God' is a metaphor*

In this book, the metaphor for the **Mystery** of life or the dynamic Sustainer of all things is 'God'. While my **desire** is to be fully inclusive, certain words, including 'God', can jar on our sensibilities for reasons that are unique to each of us. If it is helpful, discuss with your spiritual director any word that

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1 Tylenda, *A Pilgrim's Journey: The Autobiography of St. Ignatius Loyola*. This text is an example of one autobiography available.

2 Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship* is the version of the *Spiritual Exercises* used in this book.

3 Consult the Glossary for words which are bolded and italicised when used for the first time in this book.

4 *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius* are divided into numerated paragraphs [Annotations 1–20], Spiritual Exercises [21] Presupposition [22] Principle and Foundation [23] and Notations [24 and following]. They denote the generally accepted paragraphs in any of Elder Mullan's translations of the Spanish Autograph version of Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*. In the present text, such numbers are enclosed in square brackets.

jars, replacing it with what seems helpful to you. If you are unsure of the intended meaning of any word in bold type, consult the Glossary near the end of the book.

### ***Communion***

If God is the sustainer of all things, God is in communion with us and all of God's creation. Communion is the movement to which we are called, and in openness, we find ourselves drawn into God. When disruption and chaos inevitably come into our lives, God invites us to listen at ever deepening levels.<sup>5</sup>

### ***God in all things and God in one thing***

There are two (or more) connected premises on which *Grace upon Grace: Savouring the Spiritual Exercises through the Arts* is built: firstly, as in the *Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola*, God is understood as present and able to be experienced in all things. Secondly, all seemingly separate things are understood as contributing to a unified whole.

### ***God's presence***

We do not have to beg God to be with us. God is already participating in the cosmic, universal and particular aspects of life. God-within-us has the potential to enable the fulfilment of an intimate and infinite journey into the reality of God. Our physical senses sometimes deceive us into thinking that the world we perceive is all there is. We are easily distracted from a deeper knowing that God is the source of all we are.

Our spiritual senses help us to believe and trust that God might desire us, just as we desire God. As we lean into this hope, we share in the experience of people from many streams of spirituality who know that as we open ourselves to God, we find God waiting in ***love***. It seems that our deeper desires are awakened and inflamed by God's desires. If we allow space for God to be who or what God wants to be in us, we find God already present. We forget our ***ego***-selves and become one with God and all things.

### ***Is God in death, destruction and distortions of love?***

While the word 'God' and the nature of 'God' might be problematic for

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<sup>5</sup>Rohr, *When Things Fall Apart*. Email linked to online daily meditations.

some, the idea that God is in all things, including destructive behaviour, is likely to be problematic for many. God, whom many refer to as Love, seems to be at odds with destruction. How can God be Love and be in all things? How can God be in destruction, death, suffering, disaster and violence? Perhaps the complexity of this question can be explored a little by the following faith statements:

God is always present. God is present in our human ability and in our power to create and destroy. But God never desires the diminution of love. It seems that God prevents neither love nor hate, but is a resistant force in the hearts of those who are victims of violence. When people behave destructively, they diminish themselves; evil punishes evil. Destruction is apparently part of the ongoing cycle of life, just as we see in nature when a star, for example, becomes depleted of nuclear fuel, and explodes. To this point in time, cosmic life has emerged as a power which is more creative than it is destructive. On earth, God's *grace* or energy continues to bring about new abundance and life-giving *transformation*. Actions such as love, compassion and benevolence contribute to this abundance that God animates minute by minute. God is present even in distortions of creativity, such as when humans misappropriate or abuse God's creative powers. Due to such misuse of power, the pathway to human transformation becomes more circuitous and takes longer for both the perpetrator and those whom the perpetrator affects.

Distortion and destruction are not the same thing, and God is present in both. What we perceive as destruction, such as death, is part of the natural cycle of life, death and new life (*resurrection*). While destruction appears to be the breaking down of created things, it is not their obliteration. Is anything ever totally destroyed? It appears that resurrection or transformation (of energy from one form to another) eventually emerges through the apparent chaos of creativity, destruction and the distortion of creative power.

The conservation of energy is an absolute law, and yet it seems to fly in the face of things we observe every day. Sparks create a fire, which generates heat—manifest energy that wasn't there before. A battery produces power. A nuclear bomb creates an explosion. Each of these situations, however, is simply a case of energy

changing form.<sup>6</sup>

None of us has the whole picture of why we have the *freedom* to use and abuse God's creativity in us. While physics, cosmology and the theology of free will are helpful in opening us to the expansiveness of God, they are incomplete forms of knowledge. In addition, these sciences and the explanations they offer are not the primary focus of this retreat. God, and the creative consciousness of your relationship with God, is the focus.

Notice what brings life to you and what takes it from you – this is a key to your evolving *self* in life and during your days of the spiritual exercises.

### *Music*

Music is selected to support you in this retreat, but as affinity with music depends on personal taste, I encourage you to choose music which will support you at the various stages of the retreat.

- Music: Ólafur Arnalds *Þú ert jörðin* (You are the earth) on the album *Living Room Songs*. 2011.

### *Prayer*

Prayer is primarily awareness of God; it is being with God and acting with God. Your whole life can be prayer. Your presence on this planet earth makes clear that God desires for you to exist. You have already been brought into being by God. God is within you. You are able to be in the river of God's desire.

As you pray this retreat asking for the grace to deepen your awareness of God in your life, know that you are joining with spiritual seekers around the globe from many traditions, or from no tradition at all.

The exercises in *Grace upon Grace: Savouring the Spiritual Exercises through the Arts* contain poetry, images and music references, as well as excerpts from texts, especially the Judeo-Christian scriptures. Poetry is the language of the soul. It is open and spacious and allows a person to enter the words with their own story, drawing meaning in ways that frequently transcend rational thought.

Although the exercises are not prescriptive, they are chosen to take you

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<sup>6</sup> Moskowitz, 'Fact or fiction: Energy can neither be created nor destroyed', *Scientific American*, online.

through the dynamics and graces of the retreat in ways that are compatible with everyday life. These exercises move through *seasons*; each season having its particular characteristics. In life we have seasons of abundant energy, intrigue, grief, loss and sometimes of heartfelt celebration. The four seasons presented in the pages that follow are preceded by a preparation period, comprising four weeks of prayer. These weeks lay a strong foundation for the four seasons which follow. You and your spiritual director might discern that more time is needed for the preparation period; it is helpful to move through the retreat at the pace that is right for you.

Your desire to draw more closely to God in your life is the main element of prayer. You will also need time each day to dedicate to prayer. Your spiritual director guiding this retreat will listen to you, respond to your sharing and hold the process through the 30 or so weeks of the retreat. If you are praying this retreat in 30 days, your spiritual director will easily adapt the prayer material for you. One week's prayer in daily life is equivalent to one day's prayer in a silent, enclosed 30-day retreat. It is anticipated that during the 30-week retreat, a person will pray for one hour each day, plus 10–15 minutes at some point in the day or evening, to pray the *Examen* prayer.

### *Desire*

In this retreat, you will be asked to pray for what you desire. What does it mean to pray for what you desire? Desires are not superficial 'wants'; they are deeply felt aspects of love. The prayer of desire might be the prayer not to desire something, not to long for love or beauty, not to want to change or manipulate anything. Sometimes we desire God intensely but have not yet realized that we are already inextricably united with God. Sometimes our longing is to experience feelings that we associate with God – peace, joy, love. Desiring God is not about feeling good or bad. It is about relinquishing personal wants in favour of what God desires for us at that particular time. Sometimes our desire might be simply to have no desire, or to pray a prayer of presence, or simply to 'show up' for prayer, however in these instances prayer is nevertheless intentional, however small that intention is.

We are body, mind and spirit people. Although we speak of these three aspects, they form one entity. An authentic desire will never be irrational to you, although it might be non-rational or beyond rational. When we

pray in accordance with our deepest desires, we are actually moving along the prayerful journey in union with God. The ‘Take and Receive’ prayer expressed Ignatius’ desire:

### **Take and Receive**

Take, ... [God], and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all that I have and call my own. You have given it all to me. To you ... I return it. Everything is yours; Do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace. That is enough for me [234].<sup>7</sup>

In this retreat, desires are not tangible, not material. They are spiritual. Prayer for your spiritual desires is a reminder to live consciously in the flow of God’s grace. It asks you to pay attention to what is happening in your life and what life is asking of you.

So to the ever-present God we turn, as we engage in the following exercises.

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<sup>7</sup> Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship*, p. 177. This is Fleming’s paraphrase of Ignatius’ *Suscipe* prayer.