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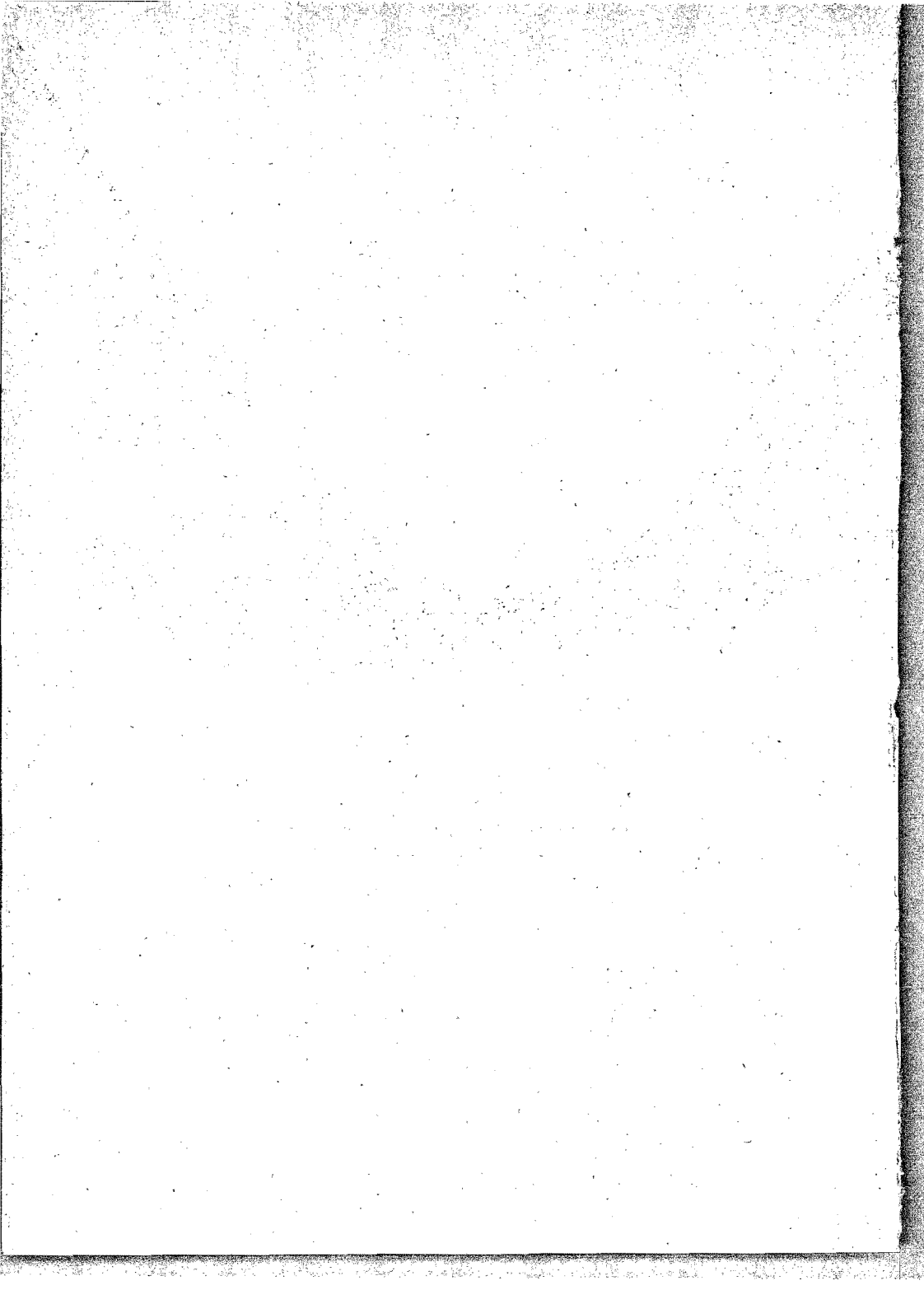
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THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES PREPARATION AND PREPARATORY FORMS

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Preface

This booklet is directed above all to leaders in the Christian Life Communities (CLC), since theirs is the special responsibility to help their members prepare for and experience in an authentic way the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, which are the source of CLC spirit. But it may well be helpful to CLC members generally; and more widely, to all who seek guidance on how to prepare for and to experience the Exercises at the best time and in the best way possible.

A certain knowledge of the Exercises, both as an instrument and as a process, is presupposed in order to grasp clearly what the booklet has to say. Ordinarily one would hope that CLC leaders (people such as national and local presidents, priest-assistants, instructors of candidates and executive councils) would already have this. However, it seems wise to at least touch on several basic points here.

The Spiritual Exercises (based on the book of this name by Ignatius Loyola) are an experience in depth of the Christian life. The full Spiritual Exercises require about thirty days. During this time the person making them devotes four or five hours a day, under the guidance of a competent director, to reflecting on and praying over Christ's whole life and teaching, always relating this to his own life. Thus he strives gradually to discern what the will of God is for him in the concrete circumstances of his daily existence. It is indeed a profound experience, involving the whole person at a deep level. Shorter experiences of the Exercises, for example of eight days, can also be quite effective, and many members of the Communities make use of them in this way annually.

While the Exercises as such comprise a limited period such as a month or a week, the living out of them is an on going, lifelong process. Such Exercises elements as open-

ness to the Spirit, response to God's personal call, acceptance of Christ's way of living, discernment in making choices, finding God in all things--these are not simply elements in an Exercises retreat but guidelines for daily living. Thus, daily living of Christ's way of life in the various preparatory steps and preparatory forms mentioned in this booklet, the Exercises in a true but abbreviated form when one is ready for them, and perhaps eventually the complete Exercises, are the tools to further this living process. It is those preparatory steps and preparatory forms which will ready one for a true Exercises experience of some length and depth that are the subject of this booklet. And--need it be added?--it is only the preparation of the one who will make the Exercises that is here considered; the preparation of the Exercises guide (director, instructor) is an extremely important subject, but much too large a one to deal with here.

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I - IS PREPARATION NEEDED ?

The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius are the core of Ignatian spirituality. This means that for the Christian Life Communities, which are inspired by this spirituality, and which look upon the Exercises as their "specific source" and "characteristic instrument" (GENERAL PRINCIPLES of CLC, n°. 4), it is of crucial importance that they be made well.

Are the Exercises something that anyone should be encouraged to experience at any time, or do they demand certain qualifications and a certain preparation in the one who makes them?

For the Full Spiritual Exercises, which demand a complete month, the answer is as clear as day. A spiritual experience that long and deep and demanding is not something to urge on all, but only to suggest to people who can greatly profit from it, at the time in their life when they are ready for it.

But what about shorter forms of the Exercises? And by this is meant not simply any form of spiritual renewal using a few of the Exercises topics, but an experience of the Exercises of sufficient length (15, 10, 8 or 6 days) and depth (involving an experience of the different phases of the paschal mystery, of discernment, of personal guidance) to communicate something of the Exercises dynamic. Is preparation needed before one undergoes such an experience?

To answer that question, let us look first of all at the text of the Exercises. We find there many things indicating that the Exercises, even in an abbreviated form, will be asking of the one who makes them much in the way of generosity, energy, reflection, stability, docility to guidance. Is everyone ready—or able—to commit himself to so serious a project? And yet, are not these qualities which

can, in some persons, be developed with time and proper preparation?

The experience, too, of both lay groups and religious orders, especially of directors of the Exercises, confirms that to make the Exercises for, say, a full week, when one is not fitted or not ready for them, makes them largely ineffective, sometimes even harmful. And that, on the other hand, those not now ready for them can often become so by well-adapted preparation over a period of time.

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II - CRITERIA FOR MAKING THE EXERCISES

What are the criteria for determining the aptness of a person to make the Exercises fruitfully? It is a topic referred to in the Exercises text itself, discussed at length in commentaries, and the subject of various papers and exchanges. Because it is a question of a person's suitability for a many-faceted experience, and every personality is unique, it is not easy to specify this in the abstract. And yet, there are some guidelines that can be traced.

One criterion has to do with desire, will, motivation. A person must want to make the Exercises, or he will profit little from them. Making them because one is part of a group that is required to do so (for example, a school class) will almost completely nullify their effectiveness, perhaps even be counter-productive. The Exercises are for a person who wants to grow as a human being, who wants to advance spiritually, who is willing to change, to develop, to become. Put another way, they are for someone who is unsatisfied--has a certain "inquiétude"--and is looking for something more, searching for something deeper. They are for a person ready and willing to make choices.

Is some degree of mental capacity needed to make the Exercises? An experience as profound and as organic as the Exercises does demand a certain ability to grasp differences, to relate things to each other. What is meant is not keen intelligence, nor book-learning, but the kind of mental capacity that is necessary for inner freedom, and for the maturity that will allow a person to make serious decisions.

Related to these two criteria is another: emotional maturity. The Exercises can only be made fruitfully by a person with at least some ability to reflect, to look at things around him, to assess them. They would be of no use to one excessively dependent on the views of others, or li

ving mainly by mood, swept along by sentiments or fads. This implies a certain maturity in one's affective life: a capacity not only for superficial personal relationships, but for true friendship and love; and an awareness of one's sexuality and an integration of it into one's own life. Going further, there is needed at least some understanding by experience of life's possibilities and obstacles and dangers, in a word of its ups and downs. For it is important that if in the Exercises one comes to make choices or decisions, one have some realization of the difficulties that may arise in carrying them out. This presumes a sense of personal responsibility both in making decisions and in executing them; which, in turn, necessarily requires a degree of social awareness and a reasonable adaptation to modern society.

Is faith, Christian faith, needed to enter fully into the Exercises? At first sight it might seem that a clear and strong faith would be a sine qua non. It is true that some elements of faith—even if weak or questioned—need to be present, since the Exercises as a whole obviously presume Catholic faith, and in various places focus specifically on elements of it. But the experience of Exercises instructors in this matter makes clear that an attitude of faith—a readiness to think, to pray, to be open to where the truth leads—is much more important than the content of the retreatant's faith, which might sometimes be rather deficient. What seem, before one begins the Exercises, like serious faith problems, often are found to be resolved in the process of earnest searching, reflection and prayer.

Of course, if one is sure the prospective retreatant has true intellectual doubts about faith, or if these revealed themselves in the course of the Exercises, they would first have to be thought through before the dynamic process of the Exercises could be begun or continued. But the fact that a person, knowing something of what the Exercises are, yet desires to make them, may indicate that he has more of a faith-residue than appears; and if he has this faith-outlook, perhaps no more at the moment need be required. However it is still true that a deep faith, an intimate acquaintance with the Gospels and with Scripture in general and an experience of personal prayer can be of great advantage to the one beginning the Exercises. If

these can form part of his preparation beforehand, it is surely best to do so.

Who is the judge of the aptness of a person to make the Spiritual Exercises? Always it involves two persons: the one who makes the Exercises ("he who receives them", says the text) and one "who gives them" (the guide or director). It is obvious both of them must agree on the matter for the Exercises to proceed. The prospective exercitant should see to it that he himself is well-informed on what the Exercises will involve and what they expect of him. Then through reflection and prayer and with good counsel, he should try to assess his own aptness. But the advice of his own spiritual guide (if he has one) or of some one who has had experience in guiding different people through the Exercises, may often be an even surer indication.

If there are reasons which counsel against someone's making the Exercises at present, what can be done to help one prepare? The rest of this booklet deals with this question, treating first of the kinds of preparation (group and individual) that might help ready one for the shorter forms of the Exercises (10 or 8 or at the minimum 6 days), and later of the kind of preparation indicated for the Full Exercises.

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III - FORMS OF GROUP PREPARATION

Group preparation is considered first, because it is often the first step, and is for most people usually less demanding. Particularly today for the young, group reflection of the Gospels, shared prayer, group revision of life are stepping stones to more personal reflection, prayer, evaluation.

What kind of preparation should be used? Clearly this depends on what is yet needed to make a person ready for the Exercises experience. The several requisites for a fruitful making of the Exercises that were described earlier in one sense all relate to a certain maturity--of heart, of mind, of emotions, of faith. Often what is needed, and what the preparation should therefore try to furnish in some way, is a combination of things: greater experience, stability, desire to grow, a readiness to make choices, an ability to reflect, a grasp of faith and a faith-attitude.

If one seeks to be more concrete, there are scores and hundreds of ways in which needed preparation can be done in group. Though these things do not fit into neat categories, it may help to think in terms of further maturity: emotional, mental, and spiritual.

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What group activities or experiences will further emotional maturity and experience? Sometimes simply the passage of time and the experience it brings with it are the best means. A person not ready for a complete week of the Exercises at 15 years of age might well be at 17 or 18. The demands of study, of school activities, of widening human relationships may bring the needed sense of responsibility. Again, participation in apostolic or humanitarian projects may strengthen unselfishness, give an experience of group relationships, build a capacity to weather reverses. Such participation is especially helpful if the results of such experience are discussed and shared regularly with others

in a group. Sometimes "getting a job", working for pay, does much to develop stability, responsibility, capacity to make choices.

At times the sort of preparation needed is what will help to flower in a person that mental capacity and mind-set needed for a mature approach to reality. This may demand a better understanding of our changing world, so different from that of twenty years ago. What group preparation could help here? For some groups it might be courses on world problems and needs, and on the Christian perspective on these. Others might have particular need of study and group discussion of the main directions taken by Vatican Council II. For quite a few, group dynamics training (by experts), carefully tailored to the capacities of the persons involved, might contribute to the necessary growth in self-awareness, realism, reflection. But these are only examples. The kind of techniques most useful will vary greatly in different cultures, even in different places.

Often what is most needed to prepare a person for the Exercises is that which heightens one's desire to grow as a person, furthers one's search for "more", one's ideal of what life can be, one's readiness to choose. Exchanges and discussions on a book like Hammarskjöld's MARKINGS or on the writings of Dom Helder Camara or Martin Luther King, or best of all on the Gospels, are sometimes a good starting-point. Well-adapted and meaningful liturgies together can over a period of time stimulate this desire to grow, especially if the liturgy is prepared together by the group. Informal shared prayer is often a powerful aid when used repeatedly and on varying topics. Group meditation on the Gospels or on current events or a group revision of life which evaluates the Christian performance of the participants are also excellent tools of preparation. Or, in a different way, the account and witness of several people who have already made the Exercises may itself be something of a preparation for others.

Would experience of Zen meditation, involvement in a Pentecostal movement, or a visit to the ecumenical monastery of Taizé be the preparation needed for some? It well might be. The various elements or forms of group preparation mentioned in the last paragraph are combined in all kinds of ways and under various names--the "spontaneous

communities" of Latin America, the "listening groups" of England, the "live-in seminars" of the Philippines, the "leadership camps" of India, the "faith experiences" of the United States, the "koinonumens" of South Africa. A fuller description of one of these forms, and some details about others, may be helpful.

The Filipino seminars make use especially of group dynamics in a context of liturgy and prayer. They are held for four days and nights, mainly but not only for students. There are no assigned speakers or topics except for one session daily on personal prayer, and that is optional. The seminar begins with the participants getting to know one another and sharing personal experiences. The members are made aware of the world of feelings through exercises in audio-visual and other communication. Often-times too role playing is used: "putting oneself in another's situation". The next stage is the building up of group consciousness and responsibility through, for example, the use of collages, where a group gathers from old magazines and newspapers pictures that express the group's sentiments. Later the group tries to work out a common goal or goals for the rest of the seminar, and the means to achieve them. Once the group or community is formed, they decide on their program and task after the seminar. In most cases the group decides to undergo a closed Ignatian retreat of four or five days a few months after the seminar. What is very important in the seminar is the informal atmosphere and the spirit of acceptance. Equally important is the initiation into prayer, the contact with persons some of whom are already committed Christians, and the kind of meaningful liturgy in which the participants really experience a community of love. The comments have been encouraging. Here is one: "It's difficult to express how it affected me. To sum up everything, I feel great. For the first time in my life, I've felt that life is nice and Christ is very near." Another: "In the live-in seminar, I realized that I had too much of a front dealing with other people. Only after removing this front will I be able to remove my front before God." And again: "The live-in taught me to treat people as persons; later on, the retreat taught me to treat God as a person."

In the "koinonumens" used in the South Africa movement, the emphasis is strongly on community, on informality, on

openness, on the paschal mystery, on shared prayer. Essentially it is an experience of living Christian community, and it usually leaves participants with a strong desire to continue this experience by deeper involvement in their own Christian Life group, and by a fuller prayer and Eucharistic life.

In the faith-experience weekend of the United States, a small group of perhaps fifteen persons, already possessing a certain degree of commitment, begin by recalling and sharing their own first meetings with God and the faith turning-points in their lives. Truly relevant Eucharistic liturgies and a reconciliation service aid them to share quite deeply their life of faith in its concrete human setting.

In some of the other forms mentioned, people are introduced to prayer by the use of picture-- or music-meditations. Or again, they are asked, after a day or more of experience of Christian community, to draw up in small groups a profile or outline of what a true Christian community should be, and then are made aware of how much of what they have sketched is found in the General Principles of the Christian Life Communities.

It should not be thought that the worth of such experiences as these is only in their being a preparation for the Exercises: all of them have very real worth in themselves, some of them quite remarkably so. But at the very same time they are developing in the participants that desire for something more, that "inquiétude", that spiritual and mental and emotional maturity that readies a person for the profound and demanding personal experience that is the Exercises.

It is worth noting that many such "renewals" or "experiences" involve both human and Christian elements on both a communitarian and individual level. And perhaps it would be true to say that the more these various experiences involve reflection and true prayer, and the more this is done not only as a group but individually, the better they prepare one for the Spiritual Exercises.

IV - INDIVIDUAL PREPARATION

Many of the elements of the various preparatory group forms can also be utilized by an individual acting on his own, or better, with the aid of a spiritual guide. A job, a year of study, travel, family responsibility, or even an unexpected reverse--any or all of these may play a part in leading a person to become more questioning, more searching, more realistic, more open.

Well-chosen reading, especially if one reflects as one reads, can at times help much. Above all is this true of reflective and prayerful reading of the Bible. A developing friendship with someone who has made and been much helped by the Exercises might be a very effective preparation; or even, the oral or written witness of a retreatant.

Frequent and active participation in the liturgy is always a help, for the liturgy, when celebrated as it should be, helps one grow at once in knowledge of Christ, commitment to Him, even in emotional maturity. Personal prayer, especially when it is mental prayer on the way of life of Jesus, prepares one for the Exercises as hardly anything else can. A daily evaluation (review) of one's life is highly recommended too; it not only brings a sharpened awareness of one's ongoing response to Christ, but also initiates a sensitivity to one's own way of acting and reacting, of thinking and feeling, to one's motivation, and so introduces one to discernment. One other element should be stressed: good spiritual direction ("guidance" is a better word) can be of exceptional help in preparing for the Exercises experience; it really should, in fact, accompany all of the other means used, whatever they be.

It is obvious that many of these elements normally form part of the way of life of CLC, and that therefore for many persons participation in a CLC group is an ideal way to ready oneself for the demanding experience of the Spiritual Exercises.

V - PREPARATION FOR THE FULL EXERCISES

The Full Spiritual Exercises will help a person most if he is entirely prepared when he makes them. Because the month's experience of the Exercises (or the Full Exercises made in the course of ordinary life, with an hour of prayer a day on the Exercises topics over a period of perhaps six to eight months) is a grace that only a limited number of persons can utilize, and then normally but once in a lifetime, it deserves to be prepared for with great care.

The criteria to determine whether a person should make the Exercises were discussed earlier. What was there said applies also to shorter forms of the Exercises. It applies above all, however, and in the fullest sense, when there is a question of a person undergoing the experience of the Full Exercises: greater mental and emotional and spiritual maturity are then required. And, since the complete experience will ask of the director (as well as the exercitant) much time and effort, it should be done only when proportionate good seems likely to result. Since, however, the Christian Life Communities are entirely inspired by the Exercises, and the aim of their members is to live them out to the full, it would seem that, at least for CLC leaders, the experience of the Full Exercises, at the right moment in their lives, might well be an ideal way of growing greatly in the spirit of their vocation.

As to preparation, experience shows that one of the very best long-term preparations for the complete Exercises is to have made them for shorter periods, say eight days, several times before. Both the repeated insertion into this school of the Christian life and the maturity gained from attempting to live out that way of life in the realities of daily existence ready one gradually for the plunge into the Full Exercises.

Another counsel, born of experience: seldom if ever should one directly suggest to a person to make the complete Exercises, even if he seems quite apt for them. Ra-

ther, he should be advised to begin to pray regularly and earnestly, asking God whether it is His will that he should make this experience, and if so, which time is the best moment for it. For it surely is true that the decision to make the complete Exercises, the choice of the right time to do so, as well as the choice of the person who will be one's guide, are matters calling for very careful discernment, and one should make the fullest use of reflection, prayer and consultation in arriving at a decision about it. Once it has been made, one or more preparatory interviews with the director, some months before the actual making of the Exercises, is usually of great help in planning the entire preparation. But some more specific suggestions can be given.

To start with, begin preparation the day the date is set. Six months or even a year is not too long to prepare. Such preparation should be spiritual, psychological and physical, and include attention to practical details.

In getting ready spiritually, prayer comes first. A certain acquaintance with, and experience of, personal mental prayer is a distinct help for the Exercises. If one has not been giving some time daily, say a quarter of an hour as a very minimum, to this personal intercourse with God, it would help very much to begin. Taking part daily or often in the liturgy is a very good way to prepare too, for it deepens our knowledge of Scripture, puts us in immediate contact with Christ and sharpens our awareness of total dependence of God. Another real help--even psychologically--is to choose some short prayer and begin to recite it daily to ask God's favor upon the coming Exercises. Spiritual guidance, always important for one trying seriously to live the Christian life, is even more important for one preparing for the Full Exercises. Such guidance can go far toward assuring that the preparation is made thoroughly and intelligently.

Suitable reading can help too. Books on the life of Ignatius Loyola and on his spirit are an aid--e.g., THE SPIRITUALITY OF ST. IGNATIUS by Hugo Rahner, ST. IGNATIUS LOYOLA (with excellent photos) by Hugo Rahner and Leonard von Matt, PEDAGOGIE DE L'EXPERIENCE SPIRITUELLE PERSONNELLE by Gilles Cusson. So also are booklets and articles which show the link between the Exercises and CLC, such as THE

SODALIST AND THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES by David Hassel, TRUE SOURCE OF SODALITY SPIRIT by Hugo Rahner, and FUNDAMENTAL THEMES OF THE GENERAL PRINCIPLES by Louis Paulussen. Reading which explains the attitudes needed in the Exercises can be of great help too, but it is not easy to find, and needs to be selected with great care. Daily reading from the Gospels is always a fine preparation. Finally, rereading of the key documents of Vatican Council II, especially ON THE CHURCH and ON THE CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD, can help assure that one's application of the Exercises will be fully contemporary.

Personal sacrifice too has a part to play in getting one ready for the Exercises, for it fosters generosity and a keener sense of our weakness and our need. An excellent preparation is to make each day some small act of self-denial or sacrifice (e.g., in food, in drink, by acts of service), asking through this for God's special blessing upon the experience soon to be undertaken.

And the psychological preparation? Mostly it is a matter of strengthening the right attitudes. Generosity and openness to God is the key condition for an effective Exercises experience, and we should try to deepen this outlook. Again, one should view the Exercises as a time alone with God, and so determine to spend the month without contact with work, family, friends, news or daily concerns. (If one is to make the Full Exercises while continuing his ordinary life--as described earlier--it will be necessary to plan carefully with one's Exercises director as to how the elements of solitude and asceticism can be integrated into or ordinary daily living.) We should also cultivate a readiness to be entirely open with our spiritual guide before and during the Exercises. It helps as well to be clear beforehand that the Exercises are truly exercise, requiring effort, energy, our fullest cooperation. Finally, one should be without illusions, convinced that the experience will be of great profit for our soul, but not necessarily spiritually pleasurable, nor striking, nor occur in the way we expect. Realism recognizes too that the Exercises are not a final step--they are a beginning.

Then there is physical preparation. One should be in the best possible health when he makes them. Special health needs ought to be attended to beforehand. If there is a

continuing health problem of some sort, one should look ahead as to how best to handle it during the retreat. Then, one should come to the Exercises physically rested. This is so important that if one arrives tired and exhausted, the director must make sure the person relaxes for a day or two before beginning the Exercises. But the right way to handle the problem is to relax a little beforehand.

Finally, there are the practical details. One should see to it that one's business or professional concerns and one's family are provided for during the Exercises. Having done this, one should leave them in God's hands. One should bring the special items needed--the Bible, a copy of the Exercises, a notebook, possibly several spiritual books if the director so suggests. Clothes that will let one be informal will help. And one should relax a bit on arriving at the place of the Exercises, before one meets with one's spiritual guide to begin this month of grace--experience that is the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius.

It is indeed of great importance for the life and growth of the Christian Life Communities that their members draw deeply on the source of their spirituality, the Spiritual Exercises, whether these be the shorter but authentic forms, or, where indicated, the Full Exercises. To do this wisely, proper preparation is needed. It is hoped that this booklet will help many people, not only members of the Communities but others too, to prepare better for this great experience.

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