The Gift of Spiritual Intimacy by Monty Williams SJ.

1st Exercise

(1) Cosmic Disorder: This contemplation asks us to consider how we find ourselves surrounded by the forces of destruction that have been there even before human history began, but it is not God's desire that we remain so trapped.

Scripture verse

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with mortals. He will dwell with them and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain no more, for the former things have passed away. (Revelation 21:1-4)

From the Spiritual Exercises

We should apply memory to the sin of the angels, that is recalling they were created in the state of grace, that they did not want to make use of the freedom God gave them to reverence and obey their Creator and God, and so falling into pride, were changed from grace to hatred of God, and cast out of heaven into hell. (Sp. Ex. #50)

Grace to be prayed for

To ask for a sense of how I, and all humanity, am implicated in a disorder larger than ourselves and how I, consciously, or unconsciously, participate in and contribute to that disorder.

St. Irenaeus affirms that creation is not sinful by nature but rather is distorted by sin. Everything God creates is good. That goodness comes because it is connected to God. Only in that relationship with God does creation find itself fulfilled. Evil tries to separate creation from God. It suggests that creation can find its meaning within itself, or within the relationships it tries to establish within itself away from God. At times it may suggest that even God is just another aspect of creation. Evil is whatever denies the mutual intimacy and desire God and creation have for each other. This mutual desire does not make one of these desires absorb the other, so that all becomes God or all becomes creation. Rather, such love lets God be God and lets creation be creation. That mutual love allows the integrity of God and of creation to be maintained.

Mutual love is not possessive. It does not seek to control. Mutual love gives the other the freedom to be, in all of the mysteriousness of what that might mean. In the freedom of loving it, God gives creation the choice of a free response in love. Creation is not compelled to love God in return for being created and loved. That would be servitude.

Creation can discover that, in loving God freely, passionately, and intimately, it comes to a fulfillment that it can never find within itself. Within that freedom, which is God's gift to creation, lies creation's freedom not to love or respond to God. It can choose instead to love the goodness it finds in itself. It may be seduced by that lesser love because of the power of self-determination this offers. When this happens, creation separates itself from God. The passionate and intimate relationship of love is broken on one side. Creation becomes sick and distorted. It experiences itself as fragmented, because it is incomplete within itself. In its separated desire for completeness, it closes in on itself. God is no longer an intimate, the lover to delight in and to delight. God becomes the alien Other. Creation becomes fearful of the Other's approaches, because in creation's present state of selfishness, such overtures of love by God wooing back the lost beloved are seen as threatening and disempowering. Creation becomes frightened by the feelings of vulnerability the invitation to love creates.

That is why it is often only in times of vulnerability, such as sickness, the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, or the change from familiar surroundings -- that we experience our creaturehood and the awareness of how much of our life is out of our control. Then we go seeking God -- often, at the beginning, with the wrong motives of wanting a return to the familiar. Instead, that search carries us past the illusions of a secure and self-sustained life into the mystery of a passionate relationship with God.
The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius carry us on that path to such spiritual intimacy.

Ignatius sees all of creation intrinsically finding its meaning and fulfillment in responding lovingly and freely to God, who creates in love, with love, and by love. This love makes all free, and in that freedom all have the choice of how to find meaning and fulfillment. The mystery of evil is that we can choose not to love, or not to respond to love. We can set ourselves up as knowing better than God how to be or how to manifest our identity.

In Ignatius’s mythology, certain cosmic powers, called angels, were the most radical level of created spirituality to misuse free choice. It is hard to imagine that extremely spiritual beings could opt to be evil, yet even in the human realm we know of very spiritually gifted people who become cult leaders or religious fanatics, or who abuse their gifts for selfish or misconceived ends. The truth is that the closer we are to God spiritually, the greater the freedom we have, and the more available are opportunities of turning away from God. That is why the saints who are closest to God often describe themselves as the greatest sinners. Their sensitivity to freedom is so great that they see how they can turn away from God even in the smallest things. Some angels, in their freedom, behaved in such a way. Their disorder contaminated all of creation, all of our human history, and even our very selves. As we pray for an understanding of this cosmic disorder, we pray to begin to recognize how we are complicit, knowingly and unknowingly, in it. We pray for the grace to experience how we are trapped by sin and evil, and how they affect our relationship with God, and even how we understand God.

Ignatius does not try to understand the mystery of evil and sin. For him, these are existential realities. He knows that it is possible to turn away from love. It is possible to become destructive because of that turning away. Sin entered creation because of that one act, and it is unimaginable to hold in one’s awareness the damage that that one act has created. When we are asked to meditate on that single act and on its consequences, we find ourselves in a state of confusion and horror. This state of confusion is the grace Ignatius asks us to pray for as we allow ourselves to become aware of the depths of that absurdity of the angels and of the implications for every single created being.

Ignatius does not ask us to enter into this meditation to depress us, or to titillate us with some Gothic darkness that excites our fantasies and casts us in the role of victims. Indeed, we are warned against those ways of maintaining our egos. Rather, Ignatius asks us to enter into a dimension of the reality of our lives so we will realize, in spite of our own vulnerability, we have not been overwhelmed, subjugated, and destroyed by such powers. How is this possible? It’s simple: God chooses in a loving freedom to protect and maintain us without taking away from us whatever freedom we still have under these circumstances.

Second, Ignatius wants us to realize, just as that single act of the dark angels created a world of destruction, any one of our many destructive acts also creates and contributes to an unleashing of chaos and suffering. He asks us to enter into that profound feeling of shame for our own rejection of love, for those times when our acts that lack mercy or compassion create a domino effect of pain, hurt, and alienation beyond our control. Each selfish act opens a Pandora’s box of evils. And yet, we discover we are still loved by God and by those who align themselves to goodness.

We become aware of God’s love that sustains and forgives and re-creates us. We can do so only when we realize how strong is the opposition to our living good and creative lives.

What usually happens at the beginning of our spiritual journey is denial of the dreadful and profound facts of evil and sin and of the ways each of us is contaminated and implicated. We are not unaware of evil, destruction, or loss. This awareness is, usually, what starts our journey. But we are unaware of just how contaminated we are by what we seek to remove ourselves from. This can be as simple as a refusal to believe what Ignatius proposes we examine prayerfully—the reality of cosmic disorder—is true. Or, our awareness can be a little more nuanced and we can consider this reality from a detached point of view. We can say to ourselves, Yes, I suppose it is true—if you believe in that sort of thing—but it really has nothing to do with me. We can even go further and think about the mystery of evil as an intellectual problem, considering why the angels did what they did, why God permits evil, and how evil and God can co-exist. Then we substitute theological inquiry for prayer. We may also enter into these meditations emotionally and feel overwhelmed by what is presented. Often at this level, incidents from our own past—whether
we were the aggressor or the victim – emerge. Then we are trapped once again in sin.

In all of these responses, the ego struggles to maintain itself as the centre of its universe. But Ignatius wants us to realize that in the midst of being dreadfully implicated in cosmic spiritual disorder, we are held by a compassionate God who cherishes us even as we act out of our blindness and disorder. Here the prayer is, as always, an encounter with God, who holds us intimately and compassionately as we struggle to come to terms with our place in an ancient and ever-present realm of cosmic disorder operating even today in all the dimensions of our lives, from the sub-atomic to the galactic. Every aspect of creation is involved and implicated. In that prayer, as we start to face the awful reality of our situation, we see that this evil has not destroyed the cosmos, and has not annihilated us. We are still here. And we are here at this moment held in prayer. Held by a God who passionately enters through the corridors of time and history, through all the dimensions of space, to come to us in this moment holding us, as the lover holding a wounded and bewildered beloved. The wonder of it Our prayer is to stay in this moment and to accept what unfolds.

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

1. How do you feel when you watch the daily news? How does that feeling contribute to the disorder you see around you? How are you made to feel that what you see is all of reality, or the most significant parts of it?

2. As you contemplate the above reflection, what aspects move you the most? Why? What do they trigger in you?

3. In what ways do you see yourself as a victim of the larger forces around you? How do you respond to that sense of victimhood and entrapment?

4. Within that larger context of disorder, in what ways do you feel truly empowered? Where does that sense of empowerment come from? How does it sustain you?

5. What questions about the nature of God as good or compassionate does the reality of evil raise in your life?

6. In your spiritual life, how do you reconcile a good God with the suffering of the powerless and the innocent?

7. How do you think evil operates? How does it operate in you and on you? What are your areas of vulnerability where you are most susceptible to evil?

8. How are you protected and defended from having that evil destroy you?

9. In your daily life and your life as a whole, how are the forces of life and creativity at work in you and around you?

10. How are you conscious of these forces? What response do you offer to them?
(2) The Disorder of Adam and Eve/The Sin of Humanity: This contemplation asks us to see in our own lives the human history which has produced us riddled with disorder yet we are not destroyed.

Scripture verses

God said, “Let us make mortals in our image, after our likeness ....” So God created mortals in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. And God blessed them .... (Genesis 1:26-31)

Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made. (Genesis 3:1)

From the Spiritual Exercises

Recall to memory how on account of [the sin of Adam and Eve] they did penance for so long a time, and the great corruption which came upon the human race that caused so many to be lost in hell. (Sp. Ex. #51)

Grace to be prayed for

To experience how I am trapped in the fallen human condition and how I contribute to it and from this to experience shame and confusion.

There was a time when the concept of original sin did not need any explanation. It proposes that we are born in destructive contexts and that patterns, habits, tendencies, and dispositions to destructiveness are inbred in us. We know about inherited traits. In our biologies, we have dispositions to certain diseases. We find in ourselves behaviour patterns, such as anger or melancholy, that are part of our family line; or we discover that, like everyone else, we were born into a dysfunctional family. We can reflect on how our family’s way of behaving has shaped how we behave. We might even consider the patterns of disorder in our culture that we accept as part of our national character. For example, in certain cultures, the exaltation of individualism at the expense of the common good is destructive to healthy community. Yet we simultaneously pride ourselves on that rugged individualism. These are all manifestations of original sin.

Original sin is not an abstract theological concept. It describes an existential reality that touches everyone. We are implicated in sin even before we are born. The families we are born into, our parents, the very genes we inherit — all are tainted with a disorder that, in different ways and forms, work against our original goodness. Original sin indicates the very human fact that, because we are all interconnected, the destructiveness of one person affects the lives of all. The destructiveness in the cosmic powers affects the rest of creation. The effects of the destructiveness in historical events generations ago, even centuries ago, are felt even today. Current international and cultural conflicts have their beginnings centuries in the past. We are born into those destructive situations. They affect us. They threaten our vulnerability and we can withdraw into self-protective modes of behaviour that stop us from living fully. This, too, is a manifestation of original sin.

The term “original sin” came from St. Augustine, who used it to counter the Pelagian heresy that free will alone was sufficient to live a full Christian life and obtain full salvation. This heresy suggests that we do not need the constant help of God to achieve fullness of life. But we know that even having a free will cannot make us free, because the context in which we exercise our freedom is dynamically corrupted and distorting. This reality is as old as humankind. The Genesis story exposes that truth. In the Genesis story, Adam and Eve were tempted and fell when God was absent. Even in Paradise, Adam’s and Eve’s freedom could not sustain the way of their continual relationship with God.

Ignatius asks us to pray the Genesis myth of our first parents to allow us to see that we are situated in a corrupted universe in which human history is further corrupted. That prayer shows us how we are implicated in the web of evil.

In the protected context of the mythical garden of Eden, humans are created by God. But because of the malice of the sin of the fallen angels, that context is already threatened; it is insecure and unstable. Nevertheless, it is the place where humans still communicate intimately and unself-consciously with God. Against the simplicity of that relationship comes the temptation of the evil one. It raises doubts in us about God’s love for us. It queries the limitations of our creaturehood by suggesting the possibility of an unlimited liberty and creativity. It does not point out the costs and implications of trying to live out of that suggested possibility. It leaves unsaid its rationale — malice — for broaching the subject. Instead, it stirs up the
desire for an impossible good to be attained by human effort alone, the performance of one sinful act.

That one sinful act has harmful consequences for the sinners themselves: it damages their relationships with each other and forces them self-consciously to isolate themselves from God. When their broken trust is brought to their attention, they defend themselves by rationalizing it and by blaming others, but they still suffer the consequences of their actions. While the sinners hide from God, God seeks them out and confronts them with the reality of their choices.

Once again Ignatius asks us to reflect prayerfully on this. He asks us to consider how temptation causes mistrust of God, offers an illusory way for immediate gratification, and incites the ego to seek an equality with God. Sin offers the illusion that creatures may take on the role of Creator. We no longer allow God to be God, because we desire to be more than just human. We desire to be like what we imagine God to be—loving and creative, but omniscient and omnipotent. We desire to displace God and become the centre of the universe. Through this sin of pride, we separate from God and are thrust into a heightened and alienating self-consciousness, now burdened with the humanly impossible task of redeeming ourselves. Out of this presumption comes our restless striving and our despair.

The object of this meditation is to become vividly aware of the human cost of choice, especially such choice made without taking into account its implications and consequences. Every human act is significant for all of creation. The enormity of this notion is overwhelming. What are we to do? What is the right thing to do? How do we judge what is right? We feel confused in the face of such implacable questions. The ego is stretched beyond its boundaries and defenses, which normally prevent it from thinking of such things. This meditation works against the ego’s illusion of believing that it knows best how to behave, and so does not need God, or that it knows better than God how things should operate. The ego’s self-maintained superiority collapses, because it realizes that it does not know all that is going on. When the ego’s defenses are broached in this way, there arises in the self a sense of confusion and shame.

Confusion occurs when the tidy systems we live by are discovered to be inadequate, shame arises when we are compelled to enter into the taboo areas of our psyche to discover that we operate very much as Adam and Eve did.
Questions for Prayer and Reflection

1. How do you see yourself as trapped?
2. What do you do to escape these traps?
3. In what ways can you not escape these traps?
4. How does that make you feel?
5. How can you live with the notion of “no escape”?
6. In what ways do those traps define who you are?
7. In what ways do those traps define how you relate to others?
8. In what ways do your image of religion and of God entrap you?
9. How do you feel when someone says to you in your traps, “God loves you”? Does it feel real? Does the true knowledge of God’s love not only come from a real sense of being freed?
Have you ever experienced that sense of being freed? That sense of constantly being freed?
10. What does being free feel like for you? How do you experience being free? How does it manifest in your daily life?

(3) The Sin of One

Scripture verse

Have mercy on me, O God,
According to your steadfast love;
According to your abundant mercy
Blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
And cleanse me from my sin!
For I know my transgressions,
And my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you only have I sinned,
And done what is evil in your sight.
(Psalm 51:1-4)

From the Spiritual Exercises

Imagine Christ Our Lord present before you upon the cross and begin to speak with him asking how it is that though he is the Creator, He has stooped to become human, and to pass from eternal life to death here in time, that thus he might die for my sins.
(Sp. Ex. #53)

This conversation is made by speaking exactly as one friend speaks to another, or as a servant speaks to a master, now asking for a favour, now blaming himself for some misdeed, now making known his affairs to him, and seeking advice in them.
(Sp. Ex. #54)

Grace to be prayed for

To be open to what Christ offers me.

Here Ignatius asks us to consider the personal destructiveness of one deadly sin. In the Scriptures, the most common understandings of sin are 1) the intentional rejection of the known will of God, 2) rebellion against God and God’s love, and 3) guilt, as the way sin twists and distorts a person’s integrity. The example of David’s manipulations for Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:2-28) reveals these three aspects. In committing adultery, he rebelled against God’s commandment, placed greater value in his lust than in God’s love, and sacrificed his conscience by his abuse of power in taking what he desired. In none of this is God essentially harmed. Those harmed are the sinner,
those connected to the sinner, and, ultimately, humanity and all of creation.

The New Testament deepens and transforms those themes because it depicts a more intimate relationship between us and God, who becomes human to be with us. He becomes mortally vulnerable to the ravages of sin. The blind malice of evil as manifested by Judas's betrayal, by the conspiracy of the Jewish priesthood in Jerusalem to silence Jesus, and by the Roman bureaucracy in maintaining a status quo result in the death of Jesus — whose sole mission was to reveal the depth of his Father's love for a creation turned against God.

Ignatius asks us to consider how one radical sin can destroy a person spiritually, just as a single foolish or impassioned or negligent act can destroy a person physically. A tainted needle, a moment of blind anger, an unbuckled seatbelt, and a life is lost. Ignatius asks us further to consider just how many such acts have actually killed real people, and how many times we have committed such acts or worse without having been destroyed.

The point is not to drive us to a position of hyper-attention, as if we can be in total control of all aspects of every situation all the time. That would just submit us further to the tyranny of the ego trying to maintain control. Rather, the point is to admit and feel and experience what it is not to be in control — the sense of confusion, of vertigo almost, that results when we see the illusions we build our lives on are without substance. We experience that profound sense of shame as we realize the many times and the many ways we have tried to maintain control at the cost of losing our integrity and our soul. As Jesus asks, "What does it profit us to gain the whole world and to suffer the loss of our own soul?"

The goal of the prayer is our experiencing the amazing and unacknowledged mercy of God as we realize that we have not destroyed ourselves, but have been rescued time and again from self-destruction or from the destruction of others. Often we are not even aware we are so protected and helped. This does not deny we have been wounded or have wounded others. But we have not been destroyed, and we have been given the time and the opportunity to return to God. This holds true not only for those who have wounded us, but also for those whom we have wounded. At this place in the Exercises, we can simply rest in the wonder of such a love and allow that love to encounter our intransigence. Our unredeemed selves experience this encounter as shame and confusion, our redeemed selves know a growing sense of wonder and gratitude. Let us abandon ourselves to that all-encompassing embrace of God. Let us allow ourselves to be loved shamelessly and passionately. What we might feel as shame and confusion is simply transformation into love at those levels of our being that are beyond our control. What we experience as awe and wonder is our coming home to a right relationship with God.

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

1. Do you experience God as forgiving?
2. Do you experience God as creatively building new life out of the ruins of your life?
3. And out of the ruins of those whose lives you have ruined?
4. Can you bring to mind the situations and moments when you have been destructive? Self-destructive?
5. Why were you not destroyed?
6. How did your destructiveness affect you? How did it affect others? What were the consequences?
7. How do you live with those consequences?
8. Can you allow God to enter into those areas? How does it feel when you let that happen?
2nd Exercise: Repetition

Scripture verse
Create a clean heart in me, O God,
And put a new and right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from your presence,
And take not your holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
And uphold me with a willing spirit.  (Psalm 51:10-12)

From the Spiritual Exercises
I shall reflect upon myself and ask:
“What have I done for Christ?”
“What am I doing for Christ?”
“What ought I to do for Christ?”  (Sp. Ex. #53)

Grace to be prayed for
To experience my whole being as an exile here on earth (Sp. Ex. #47) and being offered the path home to the fullness of life.

Carrying Our Past
Most of us live our lives focused on our immediate needs and problems. If we think beyond these, it is usually in terms of our immediate relationships. We figure, pragmatically, that the past is the past and cannot be changed, and so much of the future is beyond our control that it is no use worrying about it. We see ourselves as tiny, insignificant people caught in a world too large and complex and powerful for us. We consider such a perspective mature; it certainly helps us avoid lots of anxiety and insecurity.

But such an approach to life is not real, not true. It carries with it the barely hidden burdens of repression, blindness, and despair. During moments of quiet reflection, or during a sudden interruption of our daily habits, we are forced to reconsider who we are and what we are doing. These are the cracks that let in the light.

Our lives are shaped by our past. Often we carry that past around with us, as if we were houses haunted by ghosts that refuse to leave. These are the traumatic moments that have stunted our healthy growth and made us cautious, closed off, insecure, pained, and wounded. Unless those moments are brought to light and transformed by love, they fester and pervert us. They can even kill us spiritually. They are the sorts of things that make us think we must look after ourselves. No one else will.

This brokenness renders us immobile in the larger sphere of world action. It is also the nature of the world to create passive citizens who maintain the status quo. We do this by denying our responsibility towards creation. That responsibility goes beyond social justice and ecological wholeness. It goes beyond understanding our evolving creation on a purely natural level. We are not asked to be involved in the social and political and cultural dimensions of our world, we are involved. We must become aware of our involvement; that each of us matters, and that any one of us can be an instrument for change — for good or for evil. If we understand that, then we can examine how we, personally, have been involved and complicit with the human world.

Living with Disorder
We also have relationships with the natural world through the ways our innate urges for territory, dominance, survival, food, sex, transcendence, and bonding are caught up in moral systems and behaviours that aim either towards good or away from it. We can abuse the natural world for our own ends. But we can also worship the natural as if it were God, or an aspect of God, rather than as an aspect of God's creation. When we confuse creation with Creator, we fall into idolatry. Spiritualizing the natural merely creates ideologies of Romanticism. Rather than finding God through nature, we try to find God in nature. The natural, which includes spiritual forces, finds its fulfillment in the divine, just as one form of creativity of the divine is the natural. To live in the natural as just natural is ultimately frustrating and subversive. To live the natural as spiritual is radically limiting to our identity to be in relationship with the divine. Moreover, it distorts our real relationship with the natural.

Yet often we unconsciously do just this. Most of us would like to believe that, as civilized persons, we have achieved some form
of transcendence of the natural. We see then that we are not purely natural—though we are still creatures. That is good. When that transcendence is short-circuited, we fall into more civilized forms of disorder. Then the natural is subjected to other forms of ideology. It is treated as distinct from us and becomes a thing to be used and manipulated. We enter the world of privilege. Technology seeks to dominate or reconfigure the natural. Cosmetics abort the aging process; commercial forms of energy pollute the environment.

We cannot escape this disorder that is woven into the very fabric of our lives. Our personal disorder is part of and contributes to social disorder, which in turn is part of and contributes to cultural disorder. Cultural disorder is a part of and contributes to the disorder of the human race. The human race is contextualized in the natural and the cosmic. We are all part of creation. We act on it and it acts on us. But we can only find out how this operates if God, who is beyond creation, shows us. This second exercise directs us to ask for and to seek such a revelation.

We usually receive this understanding when we enter into all the dimensions of our lives. This inner journey of self-discovery leads to an outer journey, where we find our place in the universe and in God’s love.

We must learn these things from our own lives. No one else can teach us. Let us try to enter these places now.

In this prayer period, we explore where we are in our relationships with others, with creation, and with God. We ask for the grace to see how we affect others and are affected by them. At the end of the prayer period, have a conversation with Christ, as the Word through whom the Father creates the universe, about whatever arises from the prayer or your concerns.

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

1. How was this prayer different from the previous three prayer periods?
2. Did anything come together for you in this prayer period—in terms of insight or emotion or your relationship with God?
3. What was the most consoling moment in this prayer? What did it mean for you?
4. What was the most desolate moment in this prayer period? What does that mean for you?
5. What is happening to the ways in which you understand yourself?
6. What is happening to the ways in which you understand the relationships and moments in those relationships that have come up in your prayer?
7. How do you experience the world in this prayer period?
8. Is there any healing you would like to see happen to you now? In your own life? In relationships that have shaped you? In the way you deal with the world and the world deals with you?
6th Exercise: Hell

Scripture verse
Whatever overcomes a person enslaves that person.
(2 Peter 2:19)

From the Spiritual Exercises
I shall also thank God for this, that up to this very moment He has shown Himself so loving and merciful to me.
(Sp. Ex. #71)

Grace to be prayed for
I should ask for what I desire. Here it will be to beg for a deep sense of the pain which the lost suffer, that if because of my faults I forget the love of the eternal Lord, at least the fear of these punishments will keep me from falling into sin.
(Sp. Ex. #65)

Understanding Mysteries
This is a meditation on hell. We are asked to enter as fully as possible, imaginatively, into the realm of hell from our present perspective on life, and to use our senses to become aware of the pain that the lost suffer. From medieval times to today, popular preaching uses graphic depictions of hell as a motivation for upright behaviour. Ignatius is no different. He notes that “if because of my faults I forget the love of God, at least the fear of the pains of Hell will keep me from falling into sin.” The question is this: How can a loving God allow hell to exist? The following question is similar: How can a God of love allow evil to exist and allow the effects of evil to attack the innocent? These are big questions. They raise the very real issues of our image of God, our understanding of love, and, even more radically, the limitations of our understanding to comprehend these mysteries.

Before we can enter into this meditation, we need to examine the ways we experience hell on earth. Wars and famine abound. Oppression and the brutality of self-righteous power are rife. People torture each other and treat others with disregard and prejudice. Some people find their food in garbage dumps. People experience despair, self-pity, and meaninglessness. Anger, malice, confusion, abuse, and neglect are rampant. Some practise idolatry by expecting the world to be God and sacrificing themselves to that world. We do not have to conjure up some Gothic scenario to know this. It is part of our world, our culture, our lives, and, if we dare acknowledge it, even our own hearts.

This exercise attempts to bring to light those areas in our own lives, in our own hearts, in our predispositions that prefer to accept the disorder of a fallen world and its implications rather than accept and live out of the mercy of God. Inasmuch as we live in this world, and we accept this world as it is, we not only live in hell (and, at times, hell can be comfortable), but also we contribute to it. When we experience love and reject it, or manipulate its free gifts for our own ends, we are in hell. Hell is nothing but the rejection of love. The passion of God’s love is everywhere. Hell is filled with the love of God, but the lost refuse to acknowledge that love, and thus experience their rejection and the torments of that rejection. The mystery is not that hell exists, but that we can prefer to live out of such a rejection. And that is the mystery of the freedom that God offers us in his love. In fact, on whatever level it happens, falling in love is the path to becoming free.

Those Without Love
In this exercise, Ignatius asks us to consider those who have never experienced love, those who have been offered love but chose otherwise; and those who have been offered, have accepted, and have experienced love, but later reject it. One might want to consider child soldiers, whose only experience of life is brutality; or those in our culture who prefer success to relationships, or those who become afraid of intimacy and so retreat into the self-destructive security of narcissism.

But, more important, we can consider how these three dynamics operate in our own lives and look at the effects of living in such destructive ways. The prayer attempts to flush out any residual resistance we might have to accepting God’s love. Of course there is resistance. If we are honest, we will realize that we will always be resistant and continue to live destructively in ways beyond our control. We can admit this. In the end, we fall upon the mercy of God,
who is always willing to embrace, support, encourage, and purify us to a continually deepening love.

In becoming aware of this mercy, of allowing ourselves to experience and accept it, and in opening ourselves up to it at deeper and more comprehensive levels, we increasingly occupy the posture of gratitude and thanksgiving.

Ignatius suggests that we conclude this prayer period by allowing ourselves spontaneously to express that thanksgiving to the mystery of God we call "Abba," and to conclude with the recollected praying of the "Our Father," which expresses our relationship to the One who loves us.

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

1. Where is hell in your life?
2. How do you experience it?
3. How do you respond to it?
4. What happens when you find yourself in contact with it?
5. How does it affect you?
6. Are you helpless in those moments and situations?
7. What can you do?
8. Where is Christ in all of this? (Here you may want to recall the Elie Wiesel story of the Jewish prisoner being beaten to death in one of the prison camps while the rest were forced to watch.
   In one of the lines a voice whispered, "Where is God now?"
   Another voice answered: "Here He is – He is hanging here on this gallows.")
9. Where is the Father in all of this? Why don't you ask him where he is?
11. How do you experience the mercy of the Father now?
12. How does that mercy feel?

7th Exercise: Death

Scripture verse

God so loved the world that He gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

(John 3:16-17)

From the Spiritual Exercises

This is to consider how God works and labours for me.

(Sp. Ex. #236)

Grace to be prayed for

To experience oneself deeply as a loved sinner.

Death Is Our Friend

Ignatius suggests two other exercises to help us experience the loving mercy of God: one on death and one on judgment. These two exercises reinforce the graces of the First Week and so are included here.

We will all die. In fact, we are dying at this very moment. Heidegger says we are being thrown towards death, and nothing can stop that process. Often our life is an attempt to ignore or deny death. The exaltation of youth as the standard for beauty, accruing power as symbolic of life, and the refusal to recognize how we deplete resources in our effort to maintain extravagant and vital lifestyles are just three ways that human beings, individually and collectively, maintain a deliberate blindness to the life cycle in nature. Such blindness leads to aggression, then frustration, and then despair. Out of that despair comes the malice of self-hatred and of vindictiveness towards others.

But we need not regard death as an enemy. Constant awareness of death allows for a calm indifference to "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." It allows us to examine our values and to commit ourselves to the most important ones. It helps us to relish the
beauty in what is transient. It encourages us to seek for what abides under the transient. Death shows us that, ultimately, we cannot hold onto life. In Western mythology, the vampire is the one who, in trying to hold onto life, instead becomes a living death, corrupting everything and everyone who crosses its path.

But if we enter into the mercy of God, we discover that death can be a friend. Rather than being the final destination of an inconstant life, death becomes a doorway towards a greater life – resurrection, even. Moreover, as we relax more fully into the mercy of God, we begin to discover the many smaller deaths that are stations in our life so far. For example, each stage of our spiritual development involves rites of passage. In each of these pivotal moments, we leave behind the old and enter into the unknown and its uncertainties. We risk our very lives in those transitions, because we do not know what will emerge. But we emerge from that darkness and slowly become familiar with a new state of life. We establish relationships according to that new state of life. And then we are called once more to give up what was familiar and to journey forward again into the darkness, becoming light. Our spiritual journey into intimacy calls us ever forward beyond ourselves into greater life. That calling turns us always to the darkness, and the deaths it contains.

Transition Points

In this meditation, you can consider any one of those transition points in your life, and the ways you have negotiated the significant moments in that transition. You may even want to re-enter prayerfully into that time, especially if it was a difficult one, or if it left you with scars that are not yet signs of the resurrection. When you re-enter these moments, do so conscious of the mercy of God present there. Ask to be held and transformed by that mercy as you allow those images, sensations, and memories to emerge.

One significant way of entering this contemplation is to imagine our own death. We can imagine our fading powers and our growing dependence upon others; we can imagine moving beyond their physical help; we can imagine our own abandonment to our helplessness; we can imagine the body’s struggle beyond our will to maintain itself; we can imagine its exhaustion, we can imagine it stopping. Death. But we can also imagine being surrounded by God’s love, manifested in God’s tangible mercy. We can imagine being sup-
ported by the saints and angels and all the powers of good, by all the people we know and love who have gone before us. They all encourage us to become one with that love and that sense of compassionate presence, which desires only the fullness of life for us.

In this prayer, we can sink into that sense of presence that shows us that no one dies alone, and that this death is a time to lay down all our burdens. It is time to trust that the Divine Presence, who has cared for all from the beginning of creation, will kindly take care of all our unfinished business. We dwell in this warm, embracing sense of presence, with its sense of light entering into the depths of our being. We allow what emerges at this time of simple dwelling to be the matter for reflection and discussion with God, who desires only that we come to the fullness of life.

Questions for Prayer and Reflection

1. How do you deal with death?
2. What experiences of death have you had?
3. How do you experience death in your world?
4. How do you react to that experience?
5. In what ways has your denial of death shaped the way you live? How has it influenced your projects and plans?
6. How have you negotiated the significant transition points of your life?
7. Is there a common pattern of behaviour to those experiences?
8. Is this the way to deal with your death?
9. What would you wish to be different? What would you keep the same?
10. Is death a friend for you? Or an enemy?
11. How can you make death a friend?
12. What happens when you imagine yourself surrounded and penetrated by God’s love and light as you lie on your deathbed? Is there any unfinished business that you want God to take care of for you? Is there anything you would like to tell God or the people in your life, past and present? Is there anything you wish you had done? Or left undone?
13. How do you experience God's mercy touching those areas in your prayer?
8th Exercise: Judgment

Scripture verse

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying:
Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
And before you were born I consecrated you.

(Jeremiah 1:5)

From the Spiritual Exercises

The lover gives and shares with the beloved what he possesses, or something that he has or is able to give; and vice versa, the beloved shares with the lover.

(Sp. Ex. #231)

Grace to be prayed for

To experience God's healing love pouring into the broken and damaged places of our life transforming them and integrating them into the community that is the fullness of our life.

The Lies of Evil

God has an abiding judgment of us. God judges that we are lovable and capable of loving. In all of his dealings with us, God has never deviated from that judgment. God creates in love, with love, and through love. At our very essence we are love incarnate, for we are made in God's image and likeness.

It is evil that judges us as other than God's creation, God's creatures, God's delight. In the beginning of the book of Job, Satan is described as "the accuser." It is the evil one – or, as Ignatius so aptly calls him, "the enemy of our human nature" – who judges us negatively and asks us to judge ourselves as incapable and unworthy of love.

From the life we have lived on earth, the choices we make show whether we agree with God or with Satan. In Christian mythology, at the judgment we encounter after death, we find ourselves in the presence of God. There we experience the freedom and the self-image that we have shaped with our choices in this life. We may experience ourselves as a mass of obsessive-compulsive behaviours that manifest our narcissism, or we may find ourselves acknowledging with our very lives that we are children of God, seeing God in everything and in each other and in ourselves. We may be astonished at this self-revelation and ask, "But Lord, when did we see you?" And he will reply, "When I was hungry and you fed my hunger, when I was lonely and you became community; when I was with the oppressed and you struggled to set them free; when I was with the joyful and you celebrated life with us, when I was with those who risk themselves in creating and you did not abandon me." For truly God is in all places and all times and with all peoples. Nothing and no one is left out, for God chooses freely to be committed to us.

What we see now and at the judgment emerges from who we are. At that judgment, we shall experience God as God, and we shall experience ourselves as we truly are. We can rejoice because we are finally found and are finally coming home, or we can be like Adam and Eve in the garden after they ate the forbidden fruit, hiding from themselves and from God. Even there we can trust either in our egos or in the mercy of God.

Surrounded by Saints

For this meditation, imagine that you are already dead and are surrounded by the dynamic, compassionate love of God; surrounded by all the saints and the powers of good who pour out their energy and love into us; surrounded by all those whom you love and who love you and desire only what is best for you. Allow yourself to enter into that embrace, and allow that embrace to enter into the very depth of yourself. Deeper and ever deeper. Just remain in that state of acceptance and see what happens, and how you respond. Allow whatever emerges in your awareness to come, and, without holding onto it, offer it up to that mercy who transforms everything into life. Stay with that state of presence until it ceases.

Have a conversation with the Father about what happened in that prayer period. Allow yourself to express all the things that you experienced, and discuss what you experienced with the Father. Close with the "Our Father."