

# AWAKENING LOVE

An Ignatian Retreat  
with the

SONG *of*  
SONGS



GREGORY CLEVELAND, OMV

## Praise for *Awakening Love*

“In *Awakening Love*, Fr. Greg Cleveland gives us permission to fall in love with Jesus. The blending of the Song of Songs with the Spiritual Exercises reinforces the notion that a deep and loving friendship requires us to ‘be with’ our beloved (Christ). We are drawn by God into a human and spiritual union whereby having a disciplined and faithful life of prayer, we are now able to discern God’s will and respond with confidence and affection.”

— Christina Lynch, Psy.D.,  
President, Catholic Psychotherapy Association

“Drawing on his extensive background as a retreat master, Fr. Cleveland applies the schema of the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius to the Old Testament book, the Song of Songs. The result is an inspirational set of reflections well suited for use as a retreat. The application of the Ignatian method to the book of biblical love poetry draws the reader into the mystery of the transforming power of God’s love for each person. Having used this book of conferences and prayers for my retreat, it has opened for me a more profound understanding of how deeply God loves me and how I am called to respond in love, gratitude, and action. The spiritual renewal facilitated by the use of Cleveland’s book is very much in line with the interior renewal preached by our Jesuit Pope, Francis.”

—Most Rev. John M. LeVoir, author of *Covenant of Love* and  
Bishop of New Ulm, Minnesota

“*Awakening Love* is the result of years of serious prayer, reflection, and experience in directing the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius. The author is true to the unity and meaning of the biblical text while, at the

same time, engaging the wealth of the Church's tradition of patristic exegesis, principles of ascetical theology, contemplative insights of the great mystics, and the integrity of the Spiritual Exercises. This book achieves a profound 'awakening of love' for Jesus Christ through the process of a thirty-day retreat."

—Sr. Mary Timothea Elliott, RSM, SSD,  
Theological Consultant to the Bishop and *Censor Liborum*,  
Diocese of Knoxville, Tennessee

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SONG *of* SONGS

By Gregory Cleveland, OMV

Foreword by Kathryn J. Hermes, FSP



Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Cleveland, Gregory, author.

Title: Awakening love : an Ignatian retreat with the Song of songs / Gregory Cleveland, OMV.

Description: Boston, MA : Pauline Books & Media, [2017]

Identifiers: LCCN 2017020445 | ISBN 9780819808578 (pbk.) | ISBN 0819808571 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Ignatius, of Loyola, Saint, 1491-1556. Exercitia spiritualia. | Spiritual exercises. | Bible. Song of songs--Devotional literature. | Spiritual retreats--Catholic Church.

Classification: LCC BX2179.L8 C54 2017 | DDC 248.3--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017020445>

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Cover design by Rosana Usselman

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Published by Pauline Books & Media, 50 Saint Paul's Avenue, Boston, MA 02130-3491

Printed in the U.S.A.

[www.pauline.org](http://www.pauline.org)

Pauline Books & Media is the publishing house of the Daughters of St. Paul, an international congregation of women religious serving the Church with the communications media.

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## Foreword

In my early twenties I discovered the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius. I was especially drawn in those young adult years to Ignatius' Principle and Foundation: the truth that we come from God our Creator and that our goal is to return to him through the gift of salvation. But even after thirty years of plodding my way through my own spiritual development, using the tools Ignatius provides in his Spiritual Exercises, I have to admit that I have always felt something vital was missing.

Recently at a conference where I was a presenter, a priest approached me and asked with a sincerity that was extremely moving to me, "People have told me that I am too intellectual. I need to learn how to pray from my heart. Can you help me?" I stammered a few suggestions, but I knew that they fell short of what he really needed. My difficulty in responding reminded me of the chasm that can exist between being a person of faith and experiencing the power of God's love radiating through your life. Though people, for example, find guidance and comfort in my own *Surviving Depression: A Catholic Approach*, I have found that after reading it some still can experience a sense of separation from God.

So when I was asked to write the foreword for Father Greg Cleveland's *Awakening Love: An Ignatian Retreat and the Song of Songs* I didn't just read the book, but submitted myself completely to an experience of awakening love under the author's guidance, and I realized that Father Cleveland has put together precisely what we in today's spiritual environment most need. *Awakening Love* presents the Spiritual Exercises as a school of prayer through which we prepare ourselves to receive the divine gift of prayer: the kiss of God. This "lover's kiss," Father Cleveland explains, is a movement of the spirit

felt at a very deep level of our being, close to the center, that bridges any distance and removes any sense of separation. And isn't this what we all long to know: that we and God are intimately united through God's overflowing and never-ending tenderness?

*Awakening Love* integrates the dynamics of Saint Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises with the intensity and tenderness of the lovers' intimacy recounted in the Song of Songs. *Awakening Love* speaks to the deepest core of our being through the spiritual experience of God's thirst for us and his nearness, leading us to dedication and commitment to God's dream for us in the world.

*Awakening Love* makes both the Song of Songs and Ignatian spirituality accessible and understandable to people who are searching for God. Beginners will discover the riches of both the retreat experience of the Spiritual Exercises and the mystical content of the Song of Songs. In these past decades, the Spiritual Exercises have become a welcome and familiar landscape when we make retreat. However, some advanced pray-ers can grow weary of making the same Spiritual Exercises and are looking for new approaches and adaptations of the traditional text. *Awakening Love* will bring fresh insight using the Song of Songs, opening new horizons for the retreat experience.

For those of us who are intent upon growing in the spiritual life, the process takes time. We may feel unsatisfied or empty or insufficient because we feel we are continually collecting pieces of information—as though our spiritual life is a puzzle and we are being given only a few of the pieces. We hear something in a homily here, read something else in a book, treasure a nugget of inspiration shared with us by a friend, and try to understand our spiritual development in this fragmentary light. Even after a lifetime of puzzle pieces, we often don't understand how things “hang together.” I have always felt that somehow the process of the Spiritual Exercises helped me understand how the few pieces of the puzzle that I had come to understand were a small part of the whole picture. This is one of the gifts that the Spiritual Exercises can give you: a framework for understanding your spiritual experience, one that is robust enough to grow with you as you progress through the years.

Time is a precious commodity in today's world. That's why books such as *Awakening Love* are such a treasure. They can cut the time needed for the reader to find this personal path of growth in the spiritual life in half, and maybe in half again, when the reader surrenders to the process of the “retreat.” Father Cleveland has specialized in preaching and directing the Exercises and concentrated on the study of both the Spiritual Exercises and Christian

spirituality in general for the past twenty-five years. As a good retreat master, Father Cleveland has succeeded in writing a book that doesn't tell us one way to follow in order to discover God's love, his way, but mentors the reader gradually into surrendering to the way the Lord wants to show us how he loves us personally. Father Cleveland doesn't give a list of tasks but rather evokes in the reader's heart a "longing for the beauty and immensity of God." A good director will help us apply the wisdom of the word and of the spiritual tradition wisely to our own personal situation, by hearing what God says directly to us so that we can find God in everything. That is what this book does so well.

Here one finds a structure that guides the reader to an openness of heart that enables her or him to listen more and more deeply to the Lord of their heart. And we can listen to that Lord everywhere.

With *Awakening Love*, Father Cleveland brings a splendid integration of Scripture, prayer, the spiritual tradition, the writings of the saints, the legacy of recent popes, and a wholesome understanding of the dynamics of conversion and sanctification to the field of retreat work and spirituality. A great book is like a tree that offers shade to anyone who needs it. *Awakening Love* is such a tree. I am confident that many people will find their longing for the Lord met by the Lord's even greater thirst for them—and their soul will be stretched to infinite horizons.

KATHRYN J. HERMES, FSP

Author of *Cherished by the Lord: 100 Meditations* and  
*Surviving Depression: A Catholic Approach*



## Introduction

The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius have had a tremendous impact in the history of the Church, while the Song of Songs is the most sublime book of Scripture describing mystical union with God in prayer. Both of these works can awaken in the reader a passionate desire to love and serve the Lord. Both books describe a deeply personal encounter with the living God, and both encapsulate the entire Christian spiritual journey. In my prayer I have long pondered the profound connections between these two masterpieces. As a retreat director, I have often proposed to retreatants texts of the Song of Songs that pertain to the themes of the Spiritual Exercises, and these texts—in tandem with the Exercises—have yielded rich results in their prayer experience. In *Awakening Love*, I explore the deep correlation between the two books and provide the reader with abundant food for prayer and reflection.

The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius are a systematic way to God that is tailored to the individual. The Exercises have a dynamic methodology, an interior logic and flow. As we pray through the great themes of God's revelation in and through the sacred Scriptures, we will see a structured system and a dynamic personalism. In the midst of the systematic pattern of prayer, God reveals himself personally and uniquely to the individual. Dialogue with a spiritual director fosters this personal approach within the framework of the retreat.

The twin goals of the Exercises are union with God in prayer and the discernment of God's will for our lives. Toward the first goal, the retreat experience begins with the *Principle and Foundation*, a meditation that sets out the conditions for achieving spiritual freedom. At the heart of this freedom is a



desire for God and a strong awareness of his personal love, so we focus our prayer on this desire and awareness. The Exercises then progress through “weeks” or phases, during which we contemplate specific themes. In the first week, we meditate on sin and the reality of evil in the world and within ourselves, arriving at repentance and awareness of God’s tremendous mercy. In the second week, we contemplate Christ and the mysteries of his life to gain a more intimate knowledge of him so that we may follow him more closely. We consider the call of Christ more intensely and apply principles of discerning God’s will in our vocations, and so move toward the second goal. In the third week, we journey in greater union with Christ in his passion and death and are confirmed in our call to follow him more closely in suffering. In the fourth week, we rejoice with the risen Christ and are confirmed in the joy of following him.

We emerge from the Spiritual Exercises better attuned to God’s presence and will in all the circumstances of our lives. More conformed to Christ and his call, we can better choose according to his values. The Exercises are therefore geared to the apostolic life of an active person making choices to follow Christ in the Church and in the world.

Building upon the Gospel’s message of service to God and neighbor, the Spiritual Exercises have been described as a service-oriented spirituality. Saint Ignatius seeks to orient us to the service of Christ and others out of gratitude for what God has done for us. We make a self-offering in service to God who has offered himself for us. This beautiful note of self-offering is sounded throughout the retreat, based on a relationship of love and friendship between creature and Creator. In the Exercises, however, Saint Ignatius mentions love only a few times, which some criticize as a deficiency given love’s importance in the Gospels. Saint Ignatius emphasizes that “love ought to manifest itself in deeds rather than in words” (SpEx 230). Still, words are vital to love if love is to convey itself in actions.

In contrast with the service mentality of the Spiritual Exercises, bridal spirituality is a very different approach to prayer. Best exemplified by Carmelite saints such as Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross, and Thérèse of Lisieux, bridal spirituality explicitly emphasizes verbal expressions of love, while orienting love toward service. One of the bridal mystics’ favorite sources for this fervent articulation of love is the Song of Songs, a book of love poetry that speaks deeply of God’s ardent love for us and our loving response. On the surface, the Song of Songs appears merely to be a passionate dialogue



between two lovers, a bride and a bridegroom,\* that intensifies their union and appreciation of one another. A deeper reading of the Song of Songs, however, reveals the bride's transformation as she grows in awareness of the bridegroom. This transformation parallels our growth in holiness as we experience the Spiritual Exercises. *Awakening Love* will show how the bride's spiritual development parallels the schema of the Spiritual Exercises.

Many are drawn by the beauty of the Song of Songs but may quickly become confused by its content. Because the bridal language can seem foreign to how people experience spiritual reality, they may question the Song's relevance and wonder how it applies to ordinary Christian life. Through the themes and prayer exercises that follow, I will strive to make the Song of Songs relevant and accessible. For those looking for new approaches and adaptations of the traditional text of the Spiritual Exercises, these subjects will also bring fresh insight and open new horizons for the retreatant.

At first glance the Song of Songs is a book of love poetry describing lovers' bliss on their wedding day. The import of this expression and "sacrament" of nuptial love that unites a man and a woman should not be understated or lightly skipped over on the way to deeper spiritual meanings. Underscoring the importance of this scriptural nuptial language, John Paul II calls his reflections on the Song of Songs the "crowning" of his teachings on the theology of the body. He notes how the words, movements, and gestures of the spouses correspond to the interior movement of their hearts.<sup>1</sup> We can realize the profound expression of love through their declarations and body language.

The rich literal meaning of the Song of Songs includes references to the Temple and Israel's love and worship of the Lord. It also reveals the Lord as the Bridegroom of Israel, his bride. Other Hebrew Scriptures, such as the Psalms, Isaiah, and Hosea, corroborate this meaning. For example, in Hosea 2:19 the Lord declares to Israel: "And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy." These passages clearly reveal the Lord as the divine Bridegroom who

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\* In the quotes from the Song of Songs that follow, the bride is indicated as B; the bridegroom as G; and the daughters of Jerusalem as D—Editor.

1. See John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 549ff.

espouses Israel as his bride. The Song of Songs describes the nature of their love relationship.

The Song of Songs is not limited to this literal understanding of the nature of love but expands to an inexhaustible treasure of wisdom based on a spiritual interpretation. As the Church has always held, the Holy Spirit is the primary author behind the word, ever ready to lead to deeper levels of divine truth those who seek to understand his word in the Spirit of the Church.<sup>2</sup>

The Scriptures have a literal meaning we can grasp through study. But in prayer we are led to deeper spiritual meanings by the same Spirit who is the divine author of Scripture. Metaphor and analogy often describe our experience of union with God according to this spiritual understanding of God's word. The Fathers and Mothers of the Church describe the Song of Songs as an expression of the love of God for Israel, of Christ for his Church, and of Christ for the individual Christian—especially, then, for the Blessed Virgin Mary, as she is the perfect disciple and representative of the Church in her holiness and purity.

Given the logic the Church provides for reading and pondering scriptural texts, throughout this book we will primarily consider the spiritual understanding of the Song of Songs by using insights from the great mystics in the Church's tradition. Sometimes we will also examine the historical circumstances surrounding the text in order to clarify the author's intention and literal meaning. Finally, we will consider the text's relation to the Spiritual Exercises.

When reading the Song of Songs, women might easily place themselves in the role of the bride alongside the divine Bridegroom, while men may find that more difficult. But for all of us, Christ is the Bridegroom of our souls. Some virtues that might seem more feminine are common to all of us, male and female. Men and women both must cultivate them in order to be receptive to God's grace. All Christians, for example, are called to imitate Mary in her receptivity and responsiveness to God. While men excel at giving themselves in a way that is receiving of the other, women excel at receiving the other in a way that is giving to the other. In relating to God, we are all called

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2. Hans Urs von Balthasar has explored this topic in *The Word Made Flesh*, vol. 1 of *Explorations in Theology* (San Francisco: Saint Ignatius Press, 1989), 21.

to first excel at receiving in a giving way, as shown in the instance of Martha and Mary. Mary chose “the better part” (see Lk 10:42); she received Jesus in hospitality by sitting at his feet and listening deeply to his words. As the Lord gave himself to Mary, she simply received him, and in doing so, she also gave him love.

God desires to give himself totally to each one of us. By receiving God, we are giving ourselves back to him. God is pleased to give himself to us and delighted when we receive his gift of self in prayer.

In prayer, we remain primarily in this receptive mode before God. The bridegroom in the Song of Songs delights in his bride’s reception of him, just as God delights when we receive him through prayer, a receptivity that begins primarily in being before doing. We receive our created being as a gift from God before we communicate ourselves to others and act on their behalf. As the only-begotten Son, Christ himself receives his divine being and mission from the Father from eternity. At the moment of the incarnation he received his human nature from his mother through the power of the Holy Spirit. As man, he was then able to give of himself as the incarnate Son of God. Christ calls his disciples to be with him as companions before he sends them out on mission. In the Spiritual Exercises, we are similarly called to be with Christ in contemplation, to receive his divine life and let it flow into our apostolic activity. Saint Ignatius admitted that his way of being led in God’s grace was more passive and receptive than active and controlling.<sup>3</sup>

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3. See Jose Ignacio Tellechea Idigoras, *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: The Pilgrim Saint*, trans. Cornelius Michael Buckley, S.J. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1994), 584.



## How to Use This Book

This book may be used: *As a way to pray through the Song of Songs.* The Song of Songs is a very attractive yet mysterious book, hard to understand on a spiritual level. *Awakening Love* provides a key to understanding the profound yet elusive meaning of this mystical Scripture text and helps to apply it in one's life.

*As a way of making the Spiritual Exercises:* It is nearly impossible to make the Spiritual Exercises by reading them in their raw form and making the retreat without some explanation and guidance. *Awakening Love* "fleshes out" the Exercises and offers a spiritual compass to guide you through them. I also recommend that you reflect on your experience of God in prayer with a spiritual director, who can help you make more sense out of what is happening to you.

*As a companion to making the Spiritual Exercises:* If you are formally undertaking the Exercises with a spiritual director, *Awakening Love* will help you understand their dynamics and content, fostering greater receptivity to God's grace. The final seven chapters also make for an excellent transition into daily living at the end of the retreat. The Appendix shows how each chapter of this book corresponds to the relevant theme of the Exercises.

*As spiritual reading:* In his Spiritual Exercises Saint Ignatius provides a complete spirituality of the Christian life and gives wise advice about practicing our faith. *Awakening Love* unfolds the great truths of Ignatian spirituality and offers solid spiritual nourishment.

The end of each chapter offers questions for personal reflection and group discussion, prayer exercises based on the reading, and suggested graces



to ask for in prayer. Ordinarily I recommend taking one week to digest each chapter and engage in the accompanying prayer material, but the time frame is not fixed. Seven prayer exercises are given, one for each day of the week. You may wish to linger more deeply with certain Scripture passages and themes, without completing all seven exercises in a given week.

Although the full Spiritual Exercises are sometimes referred to as the thirty days' retreat in a closed setting, I provide thirty-two chapters and themes. There is no magic to a fixed period of thirty days in a closed retreat setting, or thirty weeks adapted to a daily life setting. In both cases, one can complete the Exercises in a longer or shorter time. Saint Ignatius allows for adaptation of the Spiritual Exercises (see SpEx 18–20):

- ⊗ *In time*, such as over a weekend, or eight days, or a full thirty days, etc.
- ⊗ *In space*, either in a closed retreat house setting or in daily life in one's home (over a number of weeks), or even in a parish setting.
- ⊗ *In content*, according to our desires, needs, and readiness. One may focus on any particular theme, such as desire, mercy, call to mission, suffering, resurrection, finding God in all things, etc.

You can read and pray with the Exercises at your own pace, privately or with the guidance of a director.

## CHAPTER I

# *The Kiss of Life*

[B] —Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! . . .

Draw me after you, let us make haste.

The king has brought me into his chambers.

[D] We will exult and rejoice in you;

we will extol your love more than wine;

rightly do they love you. (Song 1:2, 4)

It is more suitable and much better that the Creator and Lord in person communicate Himself to the devout soul in quest of the divine will, that He inflame it with His love and praise, and dispose it for the way in which it could better serve God in the future. (SpEx 15)



Saint Ignatius invites anyone making the Spiritual Exercises to come to the retreat with great desires. The drama of love in the Song of Songs begins with the bride's desire for the kiss of her beloved in a quest for union. Through kisses, lovers attempt to give themselves entirely to one another, even to exchange breath, which symbolizes life. If it were possible, they would

give the breath of life to each other and become one in a fusion of lives.<sup>4</sup> Human beings have a drive toward union, yet fall short of this complete oneness of heart. The quest for union between human beings is a good analogy of our desire for communion with God—our ultimate goal. God created passionate human love to mirror his own passionate desire for us. The image of marital union in the Song of Songs is the best image for the depths of union we experience with God.

God is a Holy Trinity of complete self-giving of persons to one another in perfect knowledge and love. In his desire to share his love with other beings, God chooses to create the universe and fill it with the very gift of himself. The Lord not only creates natural life, he also breathes the supernatural life of the Spirit into us by the grace of our baptism, uniting himself completely to us. The kiss that the bride mentions symbolizes the divine life God imparts to us, which leads us to desire to grow in it. Just as a lover's desire for greater bonding with the beloved is insatiable, so our desire for God is unquenchable, because God has first desired us with an infinite thirst.

Prayer is simply getting in touch with God's thirst for us and our longing for him. The founder of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary, Venerable Bruno Lanteri, writes that prayer basically begins with desire: "In order to facilitate prayer, it is necessary to know that force, study is not required, but only a word, a sigh, a desire ever so light, a desire in its birth, a desire that we haven't developed fully in the heart; this same disposition of the heart to pray has already passed into the heart of God."<sup>5</sup> Our desire for God has already passed through the heart of God as his desire for us, just as the bride's desire for her bridegroom flows from her response to his love.

Because God first desires us and initiates his relationship with us, prayer is God's initiative, just as the lover takes the initiative in kissing his bride. The Spiritual Exercises are a school of prayer through which we prepare ourselves to receive the divine gift of prayer, the kiss of God. Saint Ignatius offers many forms of prayer exercises as ways to dispose ourselves to receive God's grace. As we ponder these exercises, a combination of prayer and Scriptures, we use

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4. See Patrick Regan, *Advent to Pentecost: Comparing the Seasons in the Ordinary and Extraordinary Forms of the Roman Rite* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), 187–189.

5. David N. Beauregard, OMV, ed., *The Spiritual Writings of Venerable Pio Bruno Lanteri* (Boston: Oblates of the Virgin Mary, 2001), 114.



the powers of our soul—the memory, intellect, will, and imagination. God works through our faculties to reveal himself to us in prayer. We might be tempted to believe prayer flows from our own efforts, but we only respond to God’s drawing us—like the bride focusing her entire attention on her bridegroom as the object of her affection.

The kiss between lovers suggests their immediate union. The Song of Songs begins with the bride dreaming of her lover in the third person. In the Hebrew, she expresses her wish as such: “Oh, that he would kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.” Here her lover seems distant. But in the line that immediately follows, she addresses him personally, “Your love is better than wine.” What happened to change her perspective? It was her longing for him. In crying out for the bridegroom she was inviting him to draw close to her. Now she finds him present. In fact, he was never distant at all but was always close.

God is so close that he touches us. Even the notion of adoring the Lord is rooted in the Latin words *ad* and *ora*, or “to the mouth,” in the sense of kissing God. Just as the lover’s kiss bridges any distance the bride had previously perceived, so adoration of God in prayer allows God to deal directly with us, removing any sense of separation from him. God is closer to us than our inmost selves. No wonder Saint Ignatius states that “it is much more suitable . . . that the Creator and Lord Himself should impart Himself to His devout soul, embracing her to His love and praise, and disposing her for the way in which she can better hereafter serve Him.”<sup>6</sup> The word “embracing” suggests immediate contact of God with the individual soul and has conjugal connotations that resonate with the bridal spirituality of the Song of Songs. The person whom God embraces will be more inflamed with love and desire to serve than if another human being had urged the person to do so. On a related note, Saint Ignatius exhorts the director of the Spiritual Exercises to “permit the Creator to deal directly with the creature, and the creature directly with his Creator and Lord” (SpEx 15). The director does not inspire the retreatant but simply narrates faithfully the events of salvation history, enabling the retreatant to encounter God directly.

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6. SpEx 15, based on studies of the original Spanish autograph edition of the Spiritual Exercises redacted in 1969. This revised translation is almost universally held by scholars. Footnote 72 in *Ecclesial Mysticism in the Spiritual Exercises*, Michael Buckley, S.J., *Theological Studies*, September 1995, vol. 56, no. 3.



Saint Ignatius knew that God dealt with him directly, teaching him just like a schoolmaster teaches a child.<sup>7</sup> He had many distinct experiences even as a beginner in the spiritual life while he was staying in a cave near Manresa, Spain. While praying and atoning for his many sins, he had overwhelming experiences of God's forgiveness and mercy. These led him to an intimate knowledge of the Incarnate Christ, moving him to love and follow Jesus more closely. Saint Ignatius encountered the suffering Christ and sorrowed with him. The risen Lord filled him with joy and consolation, leaving him with a profound awareness of God present in and through all things. He could see with the eyes of Christ and feel with his heart. These experiences in Manresa formed the core of what Saint Ignatius would eventually call his Spiritual Exercises. Just as God dealt directly with Saint Ignatius, in the Spiritual Exercises the Lord deals directly with each person who seeks deeper prayer and spiritual growth.

Saint Ignatius' prayer experiences did not remain only at the head level but resulted in his deep devotion and conviction to follow the Lord more closely. Although we distinguish between thinking about God and knowing him personally, these two things are not opposed but complementary. Our thinking about God should lead us to love him more deeply, just as when we love another person we seek to know that person better. But our knowing cannot remain at the level of mere intellectual speculation. Saint Ignatius explains early in the Spiritual Exercises that "it is not much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but the intimate understanding and relish of the truth" (SpEx 2). It is easy to fill our heads with book knowledge and remain solely on the level of the intellect, but much more challenging to move to the level of the heart. Real prayer begins when God's grace touches our hearts, just as the bride in the Song of Songs has been deeply moved by the bridegroom to crave his kiss and embrace.

We have often heard about the Lord from others, and that has led us to believe in him. But now we seek his personal and unique revelation to our individual hearts, just as the bride desires to experience her lover directly in receiving his kiss. Origen, one of the earliest and greatest commentators on

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7. See *The Autobiography of Saint Ignatius Loyola*, trans. Joseph O'Callaghan, ed. John Olin (New York: Fordham, 1993), pars. 27–31.

the Song, exclaims, “To you I turn, Father of my Spouse . . . send him to me, that he may speak to me no longer through his servants and prophets, but that he himself come, that I may hear him speaking and teaching, and he may kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.”<sup>8</sup> We want to hear the Lord directly at the source of our being, where the Spirit of God kisses our human spirit.

Sometimes we might be living more in the context of someone else’s understanding of divine revelation and less our own. We certainly need the witness and teaching of others, but God’s grace is established uniquely in each one of us. Joseph Ratzinger once explained that there are as many ways to God as there are people; even within the same faith, each person’s way is an entirely personal one.<sup>9</sup> While certain patterns are common to all of us in the journey to God, spirituality is not “one size fits all.” Each person’s relationship with God is marked by distinctive features, as John Paul II comments: “We all know this moment in which it is no longer sufficient to speak about Jesus by repeating what others have said. You must say what you think, and not quote an opinion.”<sup>10</sup>

## Going Deeper

As important as it is to know and love God, much of this relationship escapes our awareness and remains at the level of our spiritual unconscious. The Carmelite Ruth Burrows explains that the most vital aspects of our being occur at a level beneath our awareness. Thus genuine contemplation in its substance evades our immediate awareness.<sup>11</sup> The Gospels themselves show us how little Jesus’ disciples understood his nature and mission. As Christ walked the earth and performed signs and miracles, his followers

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8. See Origen, *The Song of Songs, Commentary and Homilies*, Part One, Book One, trans. Edmond de Pressensé, manuscript dated 1862.

9. See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth: The Church at the End of the Millennium, An Interview with Peter Seewald* (San Francisco: Saint Ignatius Press, 1987), 32.

10. John Paul II, Homily during the Mass for Brazilian youth in Belo Horizonte, July 1, 1980 (Vatican web site, <https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1980.index.4.html>, last accessed October 27, 2013).

11. See Ruth Burrows, O.C.D., *Essence of Prayer* (Mahwah: Hidden Spring/Paulist, 2006), 32–33.

began to believe in him, but that faith fell woefully short of the truth about who he was. The disciples constantly failed to comprehend Jesus and often reduced his supernatural teaching to a merely natural level. For example, Peter thought Jesus' washing his feet was merely a matter of hospitality and hygiene, when it was meant to be a cleansing from sin and a share in Jesus' very life and ministry of service (see Jn 13:6–8). Nicodemus thought that being “born again” meant going back into his mother's womb, and he didn't understand it as being born of water and the Spirit (see Jn 3:1–15). Like the disciples, we are limited in our ability to receive much of the fullness of God's revelation.

Movements of grace occur when the Lord reveals himself in our hearts and minds, allowing us to receive more of his fullness; Saint Ignatius describes this as “spiritual consolation.”<sup>12</sup> Saint Ignatius speaks of the touch or “kiss” of God that the bride experiences in these deep encounters, these profound interior movements: “I call it consolation when some interior movement in the soul is caused, through which the soul comes to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord; and when it can in consequence love no created thing on the face of the earth in itself, but in the Creator of them all. . . . I call consolation every increase of hope, faith, and charity, and all interior joy which calls and attracts to heavenly things and to the salvation of one's soul, quieting it and giving it peace in its Creator and Lord” (SpEx 316).

Spiritual consolation is a spike in the ordinary experience of our life of grace. It is a movement of spirit felt at a very deep level of our being, close to the center, where God kisses and embraces us. In moments of consolation, we perceive that we are in a blessed union with God. We have an awareness of being “in tune” with God and his plan. When tuning a radio, we hear static as we move the dial. When we land on our favorite station, the static gives way to the beautiful music we were looking for; now we are clearly connected. In consolation, we experience the beautiful music of being united with God and doing his will. We also feel at peace and most at home with ourselves in God. It is important that we pay attention to these gifts. The Lord often speaks to us in consolation for various reasons: to make us aware of how much he loves

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12. For an in-depth teaching on spiritual consolation, refer to Timothy Gallagher's books: *Discernment of Spirits* (New York: Crossroads, 2005) and *Spiritual Consolation* (New York: Crossroads, 2007).

us, to give personal meaning to our relationship with him, to make us aware of his call, and to lead us to follow him more closely.

When we receive spiritual consolation, we may often notice it for a moment and then, sadly, quickly forget. Saint Ignatius suggests that we should drink deeply of God's consolations, savoring their comfort and "storing them up" for difficult times. In the Song of Songs, the King (God) has drawn the bride (us) into his chamber or "wine cellar" (v. 4). He desires that they both drink deeply of the intoxicating love they have for each other. Saint Teresa of Ávila remarks: "It doesn't seem the King wants to keep anything from her. He wants her to drink in conformity with her desire and become wholly inebriated, drinking of all the wines in God's storehouse. Let the soul rejoice in these joys. Let it admire God's grandeurs. Let it not fear to lose its life from drinking so much beyond what its natural weakness can endure."<sup>13</sup> God's consolations are meant to be savored deeply and permeate our whole being. We ought to drink in his kiss, to yield to his love in our heart, allowing the experience to have its powerful and lasting effects on our being.

This does not, however, lead us to exalt ourselves. Saint Ignatius reminds us that we should humble ourselves (see SpEx 324) in moments of spiritual consolation, realizing they are God's gift and not our own doing. At the annunciation, Mary accepts God's proposal and adds, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord" (Lk 1:38). In her Magnificat, Mary rejoices and exults in the Lord's gift, drinking fully of the moment of consolation and expressing her love and praise to God: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant" (Lk 1:46–48). She is convinced of her own humility and dependence on God for all she is and does. Mary, like the bride, has experienced the kiss of God in the most profound way—in his being conceived in her heart and taking flesh in her womb. As she ponders in her heart that God who is mighty has done great things for her, she becomes more alive in his presence. Like the bride, she is led to rejoicing, to deep communion with her Beloved. The goal of the Spiritual Exercises is to lead us into this same direct union with the Lord.

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13. Saint Teresa of Ávila, *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Ávila*, Volume Two, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, D.C.: ICS, 1980), 251–252.



### *Questions for Reflection and Discussion*

1. Do you perceive God as distant or close? Are you aware of the Lord's touch or "kiss" to you that bridges any perceived distance? What is it like?
2. When have you experienced greater awareness of the Lord's presence? How might this help you to discover those things that might still be unconscious in your relationship with God?
3. Saint Ignatius described God as a divine schoolmaster who taught him directly. He also learned from other trusted guides in the spiritual life. What have you learned from others about your relationship with God? What have you learned directly from God? What is unique about your religious experience?
4. Have you ever experienced the divine "kiss" of spiritual consolation? How would you describe it? How did it affect your spirit, soul, and body? What meaning did it have regarding your relationship with God and the direction of your life?
5. How have you expressed your heart or articulated your thoughts and feelings to the Lord? How did it impact your relationship with God?

### *Prayer Exercises*

1. Read Venerable Bruno Lanteri's words about desire and prayer (p. 10). Pray with Song of Songs 1:1, and ask for the grace to desire God more fully.
2. Pray with Exodus 3:1–6, and ask the grace that God will reveal himself to you personally.
3. Ponder the comments of John Paul II about knowing God personally (p. 13). Pray with Matthew 16:13–20, and ask for the grace to know and express who Jesus is to you.
4. Consider the apostles' lack of understanding of who Jesus was. Pray with Luke 7:11–17 or Matthew 8:14–15, and ask for the grace that what is unconscious in your relationship with the Lord may come to light.

5. Pray with Song of Songs 1:2–4, and ask for the grace to express yourself to the Lord in prayer.
6. Ponder Saint Ignatius' description of spiritual consolation (p. 14). Pray with Luke 1:39–51, and ask for the grace to rejoice in the gifts God has given to you.
7. Repeat any of the above meditations and return to the experiences of greater insight or deeper feeling.