

BY ANDY OTTO ON 19 JUL 2012

The Ignatian Way: Contemplative in Action

Reading: Mark 6:30-34

This gospel passage captures a beautiful Ignatian spirit. Let's jump to the punchline: **Stop. Reflect. Then go back to work. Then repeat.**

The world we live in is a hurried world of schedules and rushing and cramming. There's almost too much to do and seldom any time to stop. As a planner I tend to make lists of things I want to accomplish and get upset when I'm not getting to them fast enough. The corporate world is a similar story. Goals and planning leave little time for rest or pause. In corporate America time for any proper rest barely exists. Jesus and his disciples knew something of this. Everywhere they went crowds pressed in on them asking for healing or prayer or wisdom. They were so busy they barely had time to eat, says the scripture. Does that have a ring truth in your life? When I get home from work I have a list of personal things to do that sometimes I feel myself rushing through dinner. Eek.

In the gospel passage, despite their busyness, Jesus and his friends force themselves to STOP. Stopping work for a bit doesn't mean you don't care about the work, but it means you allow yourself for reflection and rest so you can start up your work again and continue doing it with zeal. The Ignatian way works like this. Being a "contemplative in action" means that your active life feeds your contemplative life and your contemplative life feeds your active life.

The Ignatian Way

1 **Stop.** We must first stop what we're doing otherwise we'll become mindless in our work. *"The apostles gathered together with Jesus and reported all they had done and taught."* (Mark 6:30) This first step is a review. What have you been up to? Perhaps you have an opportunity to share the story of your day or week or month with a friend or loved one.

2 **Rest and reflect.** *"He said to them, 'Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.'"* (Mark 6:31a) Get away and ponder. What was your experience like? How did it make you feel? Are you being fed in your work and relationships? Do you need a rest? A spiritual retreat? A vacation? Rest is critical not just for physical rejuvenation but for an opportunity to process your experiences of the past and learn for the future. What are your takeaways?

3 **Go back to work.** Or whatever you were doing. *"When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things."* (Mark 6:34) The key here is letting your reflection and prayer time inform how you approach your work when you return to it. Maybe you realise that you've been doing your work mindlessly or for the sake of "just a job" rather than for God or the common good. Maybe your reflection has caused you to approach your relationships in a renewed way or to allow yourself more rest time.

4 **Repeat.** This Ignatian framework is a cycle of informing. Your activity leads you again into a time of stopping, reviewing, resting, reflecting, and then returning to activity.

Contemplative in action: Activity informs your contemplative time and that informs your future activity and so on. The great thing is this can be done during the day with a five minute pause for reflection (like an **examen**) or it can be done in longer form on a **retreat**. Even on retreat with a spiritual director you go through the cycle of sharing your prayer experience, reflecting on it, and then allowing the director to make suggestions for future prayer based on your previous prayer experience.

Jesus and his disciples did just this with their ministry. Perhaps we can think of Jesus commanding his disciples to rest. It's a *must!* Their brief rest allowed them to go back to work with a renewed zeal. Despite the hurriedness of the modern world we can integrate the Ignatian cycle into our active lives, finding time for contemplation that feeds our activity and vice versa. It's a must in any faith life.



Instructions at the close of the Exercises

1. Just as when a man goes out of a warm place into a cold one he may easily and quickly become chilled unless he takes good care to maintain the heat that is in him, so nothing is easier than for the one who at the close of the Exercises returns to his ordinary life and conversation to lose in a very short time the fervor and light which he has gained. And there is a special danger of this because whatever good he has gained and is not yet confirmed so as to become habitual, but is rather of nature of an emotion, which is easily weakened, or even altogether lost. And when this happens, all the labor and all the fruit of the exercises is lost.
2. Therefore the first piece of advice to be given to the one who as finished the Exercises is that he should set a high value on this beginning and foundation of a spiritual life, which, by the grace of God he has laid in this retreat, and should accept it as a great benefit bestowed upon him by God, yea the greatest of all benefits, and should firmly believe that all the lights and all the knowledge which he has gained in the Exercises have been bestowed upon him by God our Lord with a particular individual love, and that as such he should study to preserve and guard them. Let him moreover fear, lest if hereafter he does not live as he has come to know that he ought to live he should be the more severely punished by God for his ingratitude, and because greater condemnation is due to one who knows what is good and does it not.
3. And secondly, let him understand that he has as yet done nothing except to receive good seed sown by God in his soul, and the unless this seed is cherished and cultivated, so as to come to maturity and bear fruit in due time, it is of itself little or nothing. This therefore ought to be his first care, not to let the good seed be snatched away by the birds, that is by the evil spirits, or choked by thorns, via earthly and corrupt thoughts and desires. Therefore, let him avoid not only sins, but also the occasions of them, especially of those to which he was prone before making the Exercises, for it is against these that he ought most of all to arm himself, since it is easy to fall back into them.
4. Thirdly, he should be exhorted to preserve and cherish, by pious and spiritual exercises, the devotion he has now gained. Amongst such exercises the following may be especially commended: **first**, that he should maintain the practice of meditating daily for half an hour, or even a whole hour if possible. **Second**, that he should make a quarter of an hour's examination of conscience every day. **Third**, that he should confess and communicate every eight days. **Forth**, that he should choose some good confessor and take him for his guide in this spiritual journey, treating with him of everything that concerns his soul. **Fifth**, that he should often read pious books and consort with good men, but shun evil ones with all his might. **Sixth**, that he should endeavor daily to advance in virtues, especially in humility, patience and charity. And in fine, that he should strive after the highest perfection which in his state of life, and according to the measure of divine grace given him, he is able to acquire.
5. These are for the most part general instructions which may be given to everyone. There are others which may be added according to the profession, or state of life, or peculiar wants, of individuals; and indeed in the case of some these may be increased and extended in accordance with their greater devotion and spiritual progress. Such cases the good and prudent director will easily recognize, assisted by the grace and light of God our Lord and Savior, to Whom be glory and honor for ever and ever. Amen