

# Understanding the spiritual journey: from the classical tradition to the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius

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Like diverse trails leading to the top of the mountain, there are many ways, adapted to the history, circumstances, and temperament of each human being,<sup>1</sup> to find fulfilment in God. One such way is that of Ignatius Loyola's Spiritual Exercises, which emerge out of the development of a classical tradition which began in the Eastern Church, crossed over to the Western Church, and developed in its own way in the centuries preceding Ignatius. Our purpose in tracing that trajectory is to find helpful understandings for ourselves, not just of Ignatius' path but also of other paths, earlier and contemporary, which maintain their value for those on a spiritual quest.

Our essay will develop in three phases:

- (1) The first will explore the traditional paradigm of the three stages of spiritual development, that of the beginners, the proficient, and the perfected, often expressed in terms of purgative, illuminative, and unitive stages. This paradigm has become classical and has endured through the centuries. Ignatius was familiar with it.
- (2) The second will explore a variant introduced by Richard of St. Victor in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. He adds a fourth stage, that of return to the world with God-like compassion.
- (3) The third will explore Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises. Their four weeks offer a further development of both the classical threefold distinction and Richard's four stages.

## 1 THE THREE-STAGE TRADITION

1.1 **A clear expression of this tradition in Bernard of Clairvaux:** We will begin with a striking passage from St. Bernard, a monk of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, who like monks both Eastern and Western sought to flee from the world, but was called to play a significant role in the life of the Church. The traditional threefold path emerges clearly in the images he chooses:

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<sup>1</sup>The image implied in this statement, a classical one, is that our progress to God is an ascent. We move from here below to heaven above. But other images can be just as evocative: some might experience themselves as seeking God by moving not so much upward as forward, into a Mystery which always comes to them from their unknown future; yet others by moving downward into the depths where they find the presence of God at the core of their being. These "many ways" include the many paths which are practiced today other than that of Ignatius Loyola, those linked to the traditions of some of the great religious orders, e.g. Franciscan, Dominican, Benedictine, Carmelite, and those coming from different traditions, Christian and non-Christian, which often offer excellent insights and suggestions for our spiritual practice.

This is the way; this is the order. First we cast ourselves at his feet and deplore before God who made us the evil we have done. Secondly we reach out for the hand which will lift us up, which can straighten our trembling knees. Last, when we have obtained that, with many prayers and tears, then perhaps we shall dare to lift our faces to the mouth which is so divinely beautiful, fearing and trembling, not only to gaze upon it but even to kiss it. For "Christ the Lord is a spirit before our face". When we are joined with him in a holy kiss we are made one with him in spirit through his kindness. (III,5)

The first comes at the beginning of our Christian life. The second is given to those who make progress. The third is a rare experience, given only to the perfect...three affections or stages in the progress of the soul: first the forgiveness of sins, then grace to do good, then the presence of him who forgives, the benefactor, is experienced as strongly as it can be in a fragile body. (IV,1)

This text is taken from Bernard’s Commentary on the Song of Songs, when he comments on verse 1:1: “let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth”. We note at the outset that Bernard is speaking of a succession of stages rather than functions that can be exercised simultaneously:

The Beginners	The Proficient	The Perfect
This stage evokes the image of the woman, whose sins were forgiven, who casts herself at the feet of Jesus, kisses them, and anoints them with oil. It is the stage in which we are converted, forgiven, turned away from sin towards God.	The second stage evokes a passage where Jesus lifts up the mother-in-law of Peter, cured of her illness. It is the stage in which we carry on our earthly pilgrimage with the constant help of Christ, who illuminates our path.	The third stage which speaks of the kiss of the mouth evokes that union with God for which we all crave. For Bernard it involves the contemplation of Christ’s face, but that contemplation ends in a kiss of holy union.

1.2 **Roots of this tradition:** Bernard was far from the first to devise stages for the spiritual journey. Already in the 4<sup>th</sup> century Eastern Church Evagrius had done so for those seeking perfection in monastic observance. The language and concerns of the Eastern Church were shaped by the Greek culture’s philosophical quest for wisdom. Salvation in this context above all means liberation from the distractions, cares, concerns of this life, and entry into a unimpeded and uninterrupted contemplative union with God, who is unchanging and eternal, as far removed as can be from the to and fro, ups and downs, instabilities of life in this everyday world. Monks fled into the desert to find this liberation.

The Western tradition is more practical, ascetical, with sharper focus on the growth of divine charity within human beings. The Eastern and Western Church, however, in these earlier centuries were in constant contact with one another, and between them we find not so much divergences as differences of emphasis. Augustine of Hippo (354-430), the early Western theologian who had the most influence in the Middle Ages, paved the way for the for the

distinction between beginners, proficient, and perfect in the practice of charity, and was followed in this by Thomas Aquinas.<sup>2</sup>

The terms often linked in the Western Church to these three stages, “purgation”, “illumination”, and “union”, also come out of the Eastern tradition. The key person in originating this terminology was an anonymous 5<sup>th</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> century author known as Dionysius. He did not use these terms to distinguish successive stages in spiritual perfection, but to describe functions which could be exercised simultaneously, as angels or clerics ministered to each other in their hierarchical orders, the lowest ones exercising a purgative function, higher ones an illuminative function as well, and the highest adding a perfective or unitive function. For Bonaventure<sup>3</sup> these functions were applied to different ways of praying. Hugh of Balma<sup>4</sup> applied these functions to the three stages of spiritual progress. Hence what is now the usual approach: (1) humans begin with purgation from sin and the various sinful disorders which affect them; (2) they are then open to illumination from God to help them develop a godly life endowed with the virtues; and (3) finally they reach readiness for a more direct contact with God who unites them to himself.

**1.3 Origins of this tradition in Scripture:** This tradition of beginners, proficient, and perfect, with its purgative, illuminative, and unitive dimensions, has roots in scripture. A privileged scriptural locus is Paul’s teachings on how salvation history as a whole progresses from creation, through the first covenant, then through Christ’s first coming which culminates in the Paschal Mystery, followed by the life of the Church here below, and ends with the fulfillment of eternal life ushered in by the *parousia* (second coming). But Paul also replicates these steps in the life of individuals, who participate in this dynamic through the successive steps of justification (entry into the pascal mystery), sanctification, and salvation (passing into eternal life).<sup>5</sup> We will present his teaching by commenting on the diagram found on the next page:

**1.3.1** First we note the two main areas of this diagram. The first, beginning from the left (bounded by a straight line), represents this present age; the second, beginning from the right (bounded by a dotted line), represents the age to come, that of eternal life. These two areas overlap in the middle, forming a circle. The area bounded by the circle pertains to both this present age and to the age to come. German exegetes have coined the term “between-time” to describe this area. This is where our present world and its struggles are situated, as well as individuals currently alive who share in these struggles. They simultaneously experience a pull

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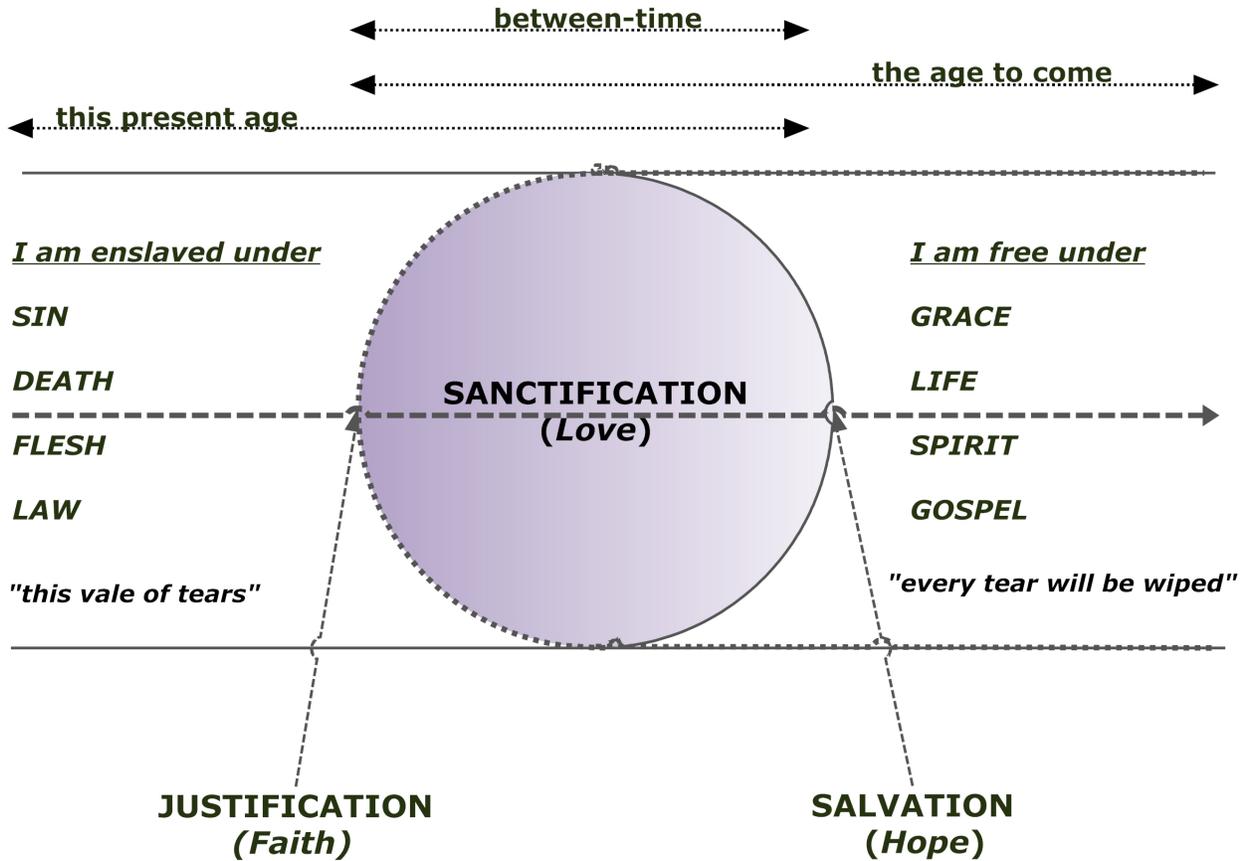
<sup>2</sup>*Summa Theologiae*, IIa-IIae, 24, 9, sed contra and corpus.

<sup>3</sup>A major Franciscan theologian of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, who wrote on this in his *The Triple Way or Love Enkindled*. His Dominican counterpart, Thomas Aquinas, did not use this language to talk about prayer or spiritual progress, but rather used the language of beginners, proficient, and perfect.

<sup>4</sup>A Carthusian monk who died in 1305.

<sup>5</sup>The best locus for this progression is the letter to the Romans, especially chapters 5-8.

in both directions: a pull backward to this present age, and its dynamic of sin leading to eternal death, and a pull forward to the age to come, and its dynamic of grace leading to glory and eternal life. They experience this tension in their individual lives but even more in the life of the world in which they live.



1.3.2 We note as well the middle line that traverses this diagram from left to right. In the Judeo-Christian world-view we move, as individuals and as a world, towards an end-point in which we reach our final stature. There is a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is quite distinct from those views which see movement as circular, a never-ending recurrence with no real beginning, no real end, and no real progress.

As far as the world is concerned, salvation history moves from creation, the fall, the promise of the covenant with the chosen people, the fulfilment of that promise in Christ, who through his death and resurrection establishes a beach-head of grace and eternal life within this world, a beach-head which will expand during the “between-time” and is bound for victory over this present age, a victory which will take place at the *parousia* (second coming) where definitive salvation is available to all.

Individual human beings have their own time of preparation for justification, a time often inhabited by various disordered behaviours and a forgetting of God, but also by the work of

grace which prepares them.<sup>6</sup> At a certain point they are ready for the grace of justification by faith, in which they let go of the false pretense of controlling their own lives and earning their salvation through their own efforts, and entrust their whole being to God in Jesus Christ. At this point the grace of God, which is the grace of the age to come, establishes a dwelling within the deepest part of themselves. They enter into the life of sanctification, which is intended to be the normal state of humans in this world. The power of grace in them is still fragile, and they can fall back; but the dynamic of the age to come lures them ever forward that the beachhead of grace within their hearts might expand into their psyches, their feelings, their relationships, and ultimately into the whole world they live in.<sup>7</sup>

There is a clear progression in the life of the individual:

- \* there is a time of new beginnings, which constellate around justification, purgation, and the experience of conversion from sin;
- \* there is that lengthy time of life in which we tread the path of sanctification, and we receive graces, often graces of illumination, which guide our path towards perfection;
- \* there is that time of life where we approach our final state of union with God and may have foretastes of that union. These are commonly described as experiences of momentary rapture where we are not connected with our senses. During this life we are earth-bound, and impeded from definitive union, only possible after our death.

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<sup>6</sup>Christ's first coming was preceded the whole journey of the chosen people who prepared a path for him, through persons such as Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. Christ's death and resurrection led him to a state in which he is not bound by the limitations of space and time. This means that even if for those living prior to his coming the salvific event that transforms humanity was a future event they hoped for, still his grace could reach out and transform them as individual persons and they would in their own way go through justification, sanctification, and salvation.

<sup>7</sup>This corresponds to a common human experience: those whom we recognize as at heart good and authentic persons may have obvious flaws that are part of their daily struggle; and, furthermore, bringing about an ordered and just society is much more difficult than bringing about order within our own complex selves.

Including our passage from Bernard of Clairvaux let us recapitulate in a diagrammatic form:

Paul	JUSTIFICATION by <u>faith</u>	SANCTIFICATION in a life of <u>love</u>	SALVATION object of our <u>hope</u>
Dionysius	PURGATION	ILLUMINATION	UNION
Augustine	the BEGINNERS	the PROFICIENT	the PERFECT
Bernard	kiss of the FEET	kiss of the HAND	kiss of the MOUTH

1.4 **Three modes of progression:** What we have just outlined is a normal (or, in computer terms, default) progression from one stage to the next, but we must remind ourselves that what has been taught about this progression as it applies to individuals is grounded not in some inexorable revealed law but in experience of what happens in most cases to people on a spiritual journey. Going through one's own spiritual journey is the work of the God's Spirit within us, and the Spirit is not bound by even our best insights about what normally happens. Persons could have experiences of mystical union at an earlier stage in their life when they are still struggling with major disorders; they might move backward as well as forward, for example in falling away and experiencing the need of a new conversion, a new stage of purgation; persons predominantly in the illuminative stage may discover areas which require a return to a stage of purgation, and so on. God has a unique way with each individual; while any normative account of this progression may offer good points of reference for us, it is not a straitjacket.

We have already referred to two modes of progression in the context of the Pauline teaching: the linear and the circular.<sup>8</sup> The linear leads to a final place of fulfillment which lies ahead of us and for which we hope; by itself the circular is just "going around in circles", endless repetition with no hope and no fulfillment.<sup>9</sup> But circular movement is a major part of our normal human experience: we often feel that we are on a treadmill and we are caught up in repetitive cycles which seem to go nowhere. We repent, ask for God's help, but eventually find ourselves needing to reenter once again the same space of repentance. "Is there anything new under the

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<sup>8</sup>Corresponding to these two modes are two meanings of the word "time". A) "Time" can refer to a chronological measurement: 6 PM August 25 2003 etc. The measure of time is cyclical, with no beginning and no end, simply the repetition of one cycle after another: minutes, hours, days, and so on. B) "Time" can also mean a significant opportunity, as when we say "now is the time to act on this matter." Greek has two words corresponding to these two meanings: *chronos* is quantitative and circular, *kairos* is qualitative and linear.

<sup>9</sup>This would be the situation of the nature religions based on agricultural cycles out of which the Hebrew religion emerged. By contrast what stood out in the Hebrew religion was a personal God inviting a chosen people to a destiny which is ahead of them, and the gradual revelation that in addition to this collective destiny there is a destiny intended for individual persons as well, in which they find their definitive stature whether with God or apart from God.

sun? Is progress towards a goal an illusion?" we may ask.

Some authors in the classical tradition have come up with a third mode, which is in the form of a spiral, which marries the linear and the circular.<sup>10</sup> It is truer to our situation. Yes, we are going around in circles, but in the long run each time we go around the circle we find ourselves in a different place, and we use different images to convey this: e.g. progressing up or down a helix, or moving outward or inward in a spiral. There is an overarching linear movement at work in us, up or down, in or out, depending on the image we use, but at times this movement is difficult to detect. What is closer to our experience is a circular movement, which combined with this linear movement, is experienced as a spiral-like movement of some form. This requires further elaboration:

1.4.1 Some people experience this progression as going down into the depths where they find the the God who is more intimate to them than they are to themselves.<sup>11</sup> Because of detours, times of apparent immobility, and backward movement, this movement may resemble that of a tread-mill, but there is progress. So the image of the helix, where perhaps the circles become smaller and smaller as one gets closer to the the depths, becomes useful.

1.4.2 Others experience this progression as ascending the heights where they find God who is totally surpassing Mystery. Again a helix-like movement, perhaps with narrowing circles as one moves towards the top.

1.4.3 Other people have the related experience of moving inward towards the centre of their own being, again to find the core, the heart, the inner self where God most properly dwells. The term "heart" often occurs in Paul: the love of God is poured into our heart, which is our inmost self. This movement can be conveyed in two different images:

\* The image of the onion which is taken apart layer by layer, a process often accompanied by tears. In the course of my life, I keep on re-entering the cycle of purgation, illumination, and union. The first times the disorders that I am aware of and regret are more superficial ones. As I peel away the layers and get closer to the core, the disorders I discover in myself are more profound, basically coming down to the basic way or ways in which I do not want God to be God for me but rather want to be

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<sup>10</sup>These three forms of movement go back to early Christian philosopher/theologians such as the influential but anonymous author known as Dionysius (6<sup>th</sup> century). He developed this distinction in a different context than ours, dealing with how the heavenly spirits influence one another and how the human soul comes to its knowledge. A reflection of his distinction is found in Aquinas' description of the contemplative life in his *Summa Theologiae* II-II 180 6. We are applying this distinction to the overall progression of the spiritual life, and our context is more experiential than theoretical.

<sup>11</sup>Augustine uses this phrase, but in a sentence which also says that God is higher than the highest part of me: "intimior intimo meo" and "superior summo meo": *Confessions* 3,6,11. He uses two of the images we develop in our text.

sufficient unto myself with the gifts that I have received, as if they were my own possession.<sup>12</sup>

- \* An alternate image of moving towards the centre, that of the labyrinth, has come to the fore in contemporary spirituality. It has deep roots. One enters into the labyrinth at the edge, and goes around in circles towards the centre, but at every step of the way there are turns, twists, surprises, and the centre that may have seemed quite close is still far away. Every part of the area of the circle is traversed as one moves from the starting point to the centre. Many will find this a more congenial description of their experience of spiritual movement. In rough terms, this movement towards the centre is spiral-like, but it allows room for the twists and turns in our spiritual development which regular spiral movement towards the centre does not depict as clearly.

1.4.4 Others will be more comfortable with the image of beginning at the centre of the circle and spiralling, expanding outwards:

- \* Paul tells us that the love of God is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5) who is given to us. This is the beginning: for Paul the heart – sometimes referred to as spirit – is the inmost centre of the human person: it is there that the person is most intimately related to God.
- \* Once this transformation has taken place, it needs to permeate all the other aspects of the person, so that ultimately we appear before the Lord blameless in spirit, soul (*psyche*) and body. The psyche is the realm of feelings and thoughts, and it may take a long time for inner conversion to permeate the psyche. An alcoholic, for instance, might have come to the inner conversion and submission to God in trusting faith that will enable him to conquer the temptation to drink each time it presents itself, but it is very very rare that his psyche is attuned to his spirit in this matter. The addictive feeling is still there. If it weren't, he would be able like others to enjoy a drink in a moderate way, without undue concern for fostering and developing a bad habit.
- \* The next expansion is from spirit to body. The body is the instrument that allows us to communicate with others like ourselves and together with them establish relationships and communities. If we are basically at peace in our hearts and our psyches, we are able to build solid self-giving relationships of love with others, and build communities of justice and peace. This we can more readily do on a more intimate and familial level, but we experience lack of power to make of the whole world a community of love, where peace and justice reign.

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<sup>12</sup>One can easily enough verify this when one compares what were the major issues in our relation to God as children, adolescents, young adults, mature adults. Things which were major issues in our younger years are relativized and newer, more foundational issues emerge. We would not have been ready to deal with them, let alone understand them, in our younger years. But our ongoing human experience, which urges us to reassess our priorities, brings us to the point where we can deal with them.

This process of expansion from the centre of the circle outwards to its outermost boundaries is a painful one, a struggle which we all experience. One image which is suggested by Richard of St. Victor is that of dilation. Boundaries are stretched, and this stretching is painful. Paul uses the related image of childbirth:

We know that the whole of creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies...(Rom 8:22-23)

**1.5 The spiral mode of progression: in greater detail:** The spiral mode encompasses both linear and circular movements, and we will focus in greater detail on these movements.

**1.5.1** The linear component of the spiral movement has a beginning, a middle, and an end. No matter how circular and random our movement in the spiritual life seems to be, we are on the overall trajectory of our redemption, which for us begins with purgation and conversion, takes us through the struggles of sanctification, and leads us to our final and definitive salvation and union with God. We are beginners, or proficient, or perfect. We don't repeat this overall movement: we have only one life and one chance to go through it and reach its intended goal. We may at times move backwards, but our hope is that God will through our hesitations and backslidings teach us and set us even more securely on the path to our perfection in the Lord.

To what extent are we aware that growth in this linear pattern is taking place? To sit down in front of a plant to watch it grow would be futile. But records kept over a period of months can offer us the proof that the plant has grown. Likewise, if we look back at certain key points of our lives and retrace the steps we have followed in our inner journey, we might discover some evidence of growth stimulated by God's grace. It is fortunate that we cannot easily zero in on our growth right now and grasp it. The danger would be that we would focus on the growth itself rather than on the God in whom and towards whom we are growing.

**1.5.2** The circular component is usually repeated many times in the course of our lives. At different moments we reenter purgation, each time at a deeper level, move on to illumination, and end up with experiences, mostly fleeting foretastes, of union with God. We cannot stay in union – witness the disappointment of Jesus' special friends when he brought them down from the mountain of transfiguration. We are led back into the world within which we are to carry out our lives. Though strong, in many cases those experiences becomes diluted as other cares and concerns of our lives begin pressing in on us, and we find ourselves either regressing or stagnating in our relationship with God. But God continues to pursue us, and at a certain point some event or relationship or perhaps evidence of unexpected disorder in our lives gives us a new perspective on ourselves and an urge to re-enter the cycle beginning with purgation. Each time we re-enter it with greater self-knowledge, and following that new cycle we can end up that much closer to the overall goal of our life-long journey towards God. For many persons this re-entry is facilitated by regular retreats.

How often do we go through this kind of cycle in our lives? More frequently for some, less for others. For some these cycles are sharply delineated, for others more vague. A person may dwell in one or other of the phases of the cycle for a longer time. For some a retreat is the beginning of a new cycle, for others a way to deepen whatever phase of the cycle the person is experiencing at the time. As we have said, God deals with each individual in a unique way.

The analogy of the annual liturgical cycle is useful. It is made up of two high points, that of Christmas which begins with Advent and ends with Epiphany/Baptism, and that of Easter which begins with Lent and ends with Pentecost. Between them there is ordinary time. Christians move out of these two intense high-points back into an ordinary experience of being with God in daily life. They may have terminated one cycle without yet being into the next cycle, but they continue to grow in the Lord in the quiet way of ordinary time. As we move through the linear progression of our own lives towards definitive salvation, there may be long periods of ordinary time.

1.5.3 A final remark. We may look upon the linear progression of our lives as a whole as a movement from purgation/conversion through illumination /sanctification to final union, consummated after our death. We may look at the repeated cycles of our spiritual life in the same way. The latter cycles are a reflection, a hologram of the former. We are able to grasp something about what happens to our lives as a whole whenever we live out a particular cycle which has its beginning, its middle, and its end.

## 2 RICHARD OF ST. VICTOR: A TWELFTH CENTURY VARIANT

We have already alluded to the more practical bent in spirituality which emerged in the Western Church. Richard of St. Victor was a member of the Abbey of St. Victor, which flourished in Paris. This was not a typical monastic foundation nestled somewhere in the forest with monks seeking the salvation of their souls in prayer and withdrawal from the world. It had an apostolic thrust, especially in the intellectual ministry, and played a key role in building up Paris as a centre of theological study in medieval Europe. Its members were not monks but canons regular.<sup>13</sup> Richard was a spiritual guide, perhaps a novice master, and prior of his abbey, and wrote abundantly in the area of spirituality.

2.1 **Richard's *Four Degrees of Violent Love***: This is perhaps Richard's most innovative

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<sup>13</sup>In rough terms, on the spectrum of religious life canons regular are found somewhere between monks and contemporary apostolic religious. They lived a regular life in abbeys, sang the office, generally followed the Augustinian rule, but differed from monks in their apostolic commitments. Priests in the Society of Jesus founded in the 16<sup>th</sup> century were clerks regular, apostolic religious without the obligation of praying the office in common.

work.<sup>14</sup> It will help us to make a link between the earlier three-fold spiritual tradition we have been dealing with thus far and the later four-fold presentation Ignatius uses in his *Exercises*.

For Richard love makes a violent entrance and wrenches human beings as it progresses through its different stages. A love oriented to what is less than God is not only wrenching but also utterly destructive. If love is directed to God, this wrenching is good and wholesome, because it means being taken out of one's false self and transformed as much as possible into God. Richard's first three degrees have a clear affinity with the three stages later known as purgation, illumination, and union. The fourth, return to the world as a vehicle of God's own compassion, is Richard's creative contribution to our understanding of the spiritual journey.

The diagrammatic presentation on the next page offers in an abbreviated and somewhat adapted form the gist of Richard's teaching, showing how one progresses through these four degrees. The rows represent various aspects of this progression as described by Richard, and the columns each of the four degrees. We will comment on each row:

2.1.1 Row 1: this row shows the dynamic movement of persons going through this process of love's violent entry. The first step is entering into oneself, reflecting on oneself and one's situation, in imitation of what the prodigal son did as he began his process of return to his father (Lk 15:17). Then one journeys towards God, which is a good description of the lengthy process of sanctification/illumination. In union human beings are absorbed into God, totally forgetful of self. But this state is not the final one. They leave the ecstasy of whatever experience of union they have received, go out of themselves, lower themselves in compassionate service of others.

2.1.2 The second row gives us Richard's sense of the types of prayer that characterize each stage. The first is meditative prayer, in which the mind moves in disciplined and fruitful reflection.<sup>15</sup> It is akin to the type of prayer which Ignatius calls for in his first week of the

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<sup>14</sup>Other spiritual works from his pen are widely read and appreciated. Together with the Four Degrees of Violent Love his *Benjamin Major (or The Mystical Ark)* and *Benjamin Minor (or The Twelve Patriarchs)*, translated in the Library of Christian Classics (Paulist Press 1979), and a lesser known work the *Edict of Alexander* (translated by J.-M. Laporte, to be made available on the web), we find the basis of a detailed approach to growth in the spiritual life and in contemplation. Richard, however, was a pioneering author. He came up with breathtaking diagrammatic vistas, but they can't be easily knitted together in a totally coherent whole.

<sup>15</sup>Richard is not always consistent in his use of the word "contemplation", but he suggests a clear classification in *Mystical Ark* 1,3. There he begins with cogitation, which is the unfocused to and fro of consciousness, without labour and without fruit, prior to prayer; he continues with meditation, which is the effort of disciplined thought, with labour and with fruit; he ends with contemplation, the gift of penetrating gaze, without labour but with fruit. Later he suggests that ultimately contemplation draws the mind out of itself in a form of alienation (MA 5,2). The progression has affinities with the classical stages.

Exercises. The second is contemplative prayer, in which the mind rests in a penetrating and synoptic gaze, akin to the type of prayer proposed by Ignatius for the second week. The third is a prayer of ecstasy, of being totally drawn out of oneself into God. As one moves into the third and fourth week of the Exercises, Ignatian contemplation naturally leads to more frequent unitive moments, as one seeks to unite oneself with Christ in his sorrow (3<sup>rd</sup> week) and his joy (4<sup>th</sup> week). In the fourth phase, persons go out in compassion, a compassion that brings them into the hurly burly of daily existence. It is the descent from the mount of transfiguration, a descent to which Jesus invited his favourite apostles. This may feel like a return to distraction to the one with some experience of union, but this compassion is grounded in a deep and abiding relationship with God.<sup>16</sup> If I contemplate God and admire his compassion, what else is there to do but to imitate that compassion?

2.1.3 The third row focuses on the scriptural theme of thirst (e.g. Ps 42), but whereas rather than thirsting for God as one does in the first three stages, in the fourth stage one begins to thirst as God thirsts, in compassion for broken creation and sinful humanity which needs healing. This reversal is attested in scripture as well, in Jesus' cry on the cross, "I thirst". In Jesus God really thirsts for us. Rather than labouring to find God, in this fourth stage I allow God to labour through me, and I share in his labour.

2.1.4 In the compassion column of row four, Richard speaks of fruitfulness. I have put this point in a more contemporary perspective in which the fruitfulness of marital intimacy is seen as more than the physical begetting of children.

2.1.5 The last two members of the fifth row show Richard's creativity. First he is adding a specifically Christological note here by alluding to the death and resurrection, and using the language of emptying out. The underlying text is that of Philippians: "Though He was in the form of God, he did not consider his equality with God something to be exploited, but he emptied himself out, taking the form of a slave..." (Phil 2:6-7). Humans who have reached the third degree, that of union, find their selves absorbed into God, and in that sense die to self and are found in the form of God. But just as Jesus did not remain in the form of God, but emptied himself out taking the form of a servant, and chose to live in our world of struggle, violence, ambiguity, so too the one who reaches union is invited to move beyond in self-emptying and compassion. In doing so he more deeply reassumes his human self as transformed by God's own perspective. For him God is no longer simply seen as object of his desire. God dwells in him and in him desires salvation for every human being.

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<sup>16</sup>That can raise an important question for my self-examination, one to which the answer is not always clear. My supposed compassion may be a form of activism by which I distract myself from God and the things of God, or else it may be the genuine fruit of my spiritual journey and whatever union with God I have experienced.

**THE FOUR DEGREES OF VIOLENT LOVE (Richard of St. Victor, 12<sup>th</sup> Century):** How the love of God makes a violent entry into me, wrenches me from my false self and transforms me into God. The first three degrees of this action correspond to the three classical stages. The last degree is Richard's contribution. *(This diagram is an adaptation).*

	<b>DEGREE ONE:</b>	<b>DEGREE TWO:</b>	<b>DEGREE THREE:</b>	<b>DEGREE FOUR:</b>
	<b>PURGATION</b>	<b>ILLUMINATION</b>	<b>UNION</b>	<b>COMPASSION</b>
1	I return to myself	I rise above myself and journey towards God	I am totally carried and absorbed into God	I go out of myself, lower myself for the sake of God
2	I enter in meditation	I rise in contemplation	I am introduced in jubilation (ecstasy)	I go out in compassion
3	my restless soul thirsts for God	I thirst to journey towards God	I thirst to be absorbed into God	I thirst as God thirsts, to restore His fractured creation to its fulness
4	engagement	wedding	consummation	ordinary life, caring for children and others
5	I am elevated to my true self	I am elevated to God	I am transformed into the form of God DEATH TO SELF	I am transformed into the form of the servant RESURRECTION OF SELF
6	I experience sweetness but still lack clarity	I am illuminated and find clarity	I am absorbed into God and liquefied	I pour myself out to others in service
7	love wounds me	love binds me	I languish in love	I expire in love

2.1.6 The last two columns of the sixth row use another image to say the same thing. Before I can be poured out in service (an image closely connected with the emptying out of the Philippians text) I must be liquefied. The solid self which I have built for myself needs to be dissolved, liquefied, so that I might pour myself out in selfless service.

2.1.7 The last row shows how divine love gradually enters into the life and heart of the person who goes through the four stages. This is developed more thoroughly in the text; in the first stage love dominates me, but does not occupy the forefront of my consciousness except at certain moments; in the second love becomes a constant habitual presence which accompanies all my concerns; in the third love envelops my consciousness and I become

oblivious of all else; in the fourth my love for God leads me to love others as God loves them, and I become involved in the world in a completely different way.

**2.2 Richard within the tradition: a broader perspective:** We have described the specific contribution made by Richard's four degrees of violent love, and now we will place his contribution in a broader perspective.

2.2.1 First of all, we note that the four degrees of violent love are not Richard's only contribution to the tradition. These four degrees pertain to the spiritual life as a whole, but his two works on contemplation, *The Twelve Patriarchs* and *The Mystical Ark*, offer clarity on how one prepares for and progresses in contemplation. An earlier work, *The Edict of Alexander*, adheres to the classical three stages, but hints at the fourth stage which emerges in *The Four Degrees of Violent Love*.<sup>17</sup> It also offers a key, as we shall see in the next section, to understand how we can superimpose the three classical ways on the four Ignatian weeks.

Finally in his *On the Extermination of Evil and the Promotion of Good*, a treatise not yet translated into English, he offers a very useful image which helps us link the classical tradition with the Pauline movement from justification through sanctification to salvation. The key text is Ps 114:5: "Why is it, O sea, that you fled? O Jordan, that you turned back?" This text alludes to two miracles which begin and end the long journey of the chosen people from being slaves in Egypt to enjoying the Promised Land. Between these events the chosen people make a long journey through the desert. Both of these events are miracles having to do with water. In their flight out of Egypt, the waters of the Red Sea parted so they could leave behind their pursuers and carry on their journey. But at the end of their journey the Jordan river stopped its course so that they could get through to the promised land. The first event corresponds to justification in Pauline terms, the second to salvation, and what lies in between is the lengthy journey of sanctification which has its ups and downs, its meanderings and delays.

2.2.2 There is a clear Pauline antecedent to Richard's transition from absorption into God (the third degree of violent love, which in the classical scheme would be the final one) to compassion for the world (the fourth degree). The key passage is Phil 1:23-24: "I desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ...But to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you". The liquefaction to which Richard alludes in his third degree is clearly evoked in this passage with the term "dissolved". To be totally absorbed into Christ is Paul's deepest desire, but even stronger is his readiness to carry on his ministry in the earthly state as long as that is God's will for him. Another text which indicates his readiness to depart from warm intimacy with God is

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<sup>17</sup>Each of the three classical stages is differentiated in this early work. Purgation begins with fear, regret for past sins committed, but then leads to an active, loving life of good works to make up for the good one has not done in the past. Sanctification begins with increase in perfection, but such increase needs to be accompanied by perseverance if it is to be ultimately fruitful. Union begins with a more imperfect contemplation through sensible things; continues with a more perfect contemplation which allows the genuinely contemplative a glimpse of God without such mediation; and beyond that some are called to be prophets, to share with others the knowledge they have received in contemplation.

found in Rom 9:3: “for I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people.” In his innovation Richard was building on an old foundation.

2.2.3 The Victorine canons regular professed a life of both contemplation and action. In their case contemplation was to issue forth in preaching and teaching. Later in the 13<sup>th</sup> century another category of religious, called friars, followed a similar pattern of life, but in a more mendicant and itinerant mode. The two major groups were the Franciscans and the Dominicans. Thomas Aquinas was the eminent theologian of the early Dominicans, and in vindication of the legitimacy, even pre-eminence, of the style of religious observance which he had adopted, he wrote, in his *De Caritate*, a passage which strikingly mirrors Richard’s movement beyond contemplation to compassion:

We can consider three degrees in charity: (1) There are some who freely, or without great vexation, are separated from the leisure of divine contemplation so that they are concerned with earthly affairs, and in these persons there appears to be either no charity or very little. (2) Some, however, so delight in the leisure of divine contemplation that they do not want to turn away from it even to apply their service of God to the salvation of their fellow human beings. (3) The highest degree, the third, applies to those who rise to the heights of charity so that even as they advance in divine contemplation, although they are very much delighted with it, they serve God in order to save their fellow human beings. This is the perfection meant by St. Paul : “*I desire to be dissolved and to be with Christ...but to remain in the flesh in more necessary for you.*” (Phil 1:23-24)

In the same text he uses the following image to present the highest degree:

The perfection of love for a worthy person whom one tries to serve is to abstain from the pleasure of being in the friend’s presence for the sake of that friend. So, according to that friendship, the one who would absent himself from a friend for the friend’s sake would love the friend more that one who would not be ready to depart from the presence of that friend even for that friend’s sake.<sup>18</sup>

### 3 THE FOUR WEEKS OF IGNATIUS

This is not the place to offer a full account of the genesis of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. His own experience in directing others was paramount in the elaboration of his text, an elaboration which took place over a number of years. He became more broadly acquainted, most likely during his studies in Paris, with authors who wrote on the human spiritual pilgrimage. Precise dependencies, e.g. of his text on texts of Richard of St. Victor, cannot be

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<sup>18</sup>*De Caritate*, 11, ad 6. In *Ila-Ilae* 24 9 c Aquinas endorses the traditional three grades of charity, that of beginners, of the proficient, and of the perfect. He concludes his account of the highest grade with the same passage of Paul, but cuts it off at “...to be dissolved and to be with Christ”. But in the *De Caritate* he goes one step further with the continuation of that Pauline passage. There is no reference in this question to Richard of St. Victor’s thought at this point, but there is a striking convergence. In other writings Aquinas does specifically refer to Richard’s work on the Trinity and on contemplation.

documented, though some thought patterns are similar. However he was acquainted with the received terminology of purgative/illuminative/unitive ways.<sup>19</sup> Both were urban people, belonging to a religious order which had a clear apostolic bent. Richard was a canon regular, and his life orbited around his abbey. Ignatius was a clerk regular, and his life, especially in earlier years, was that of a pilgrim. Rather than dependency could there be parallelism: out of similar experiences and contexts they came up with the same movement away from a tripartite to a quadripartite division for the spiritual journey.

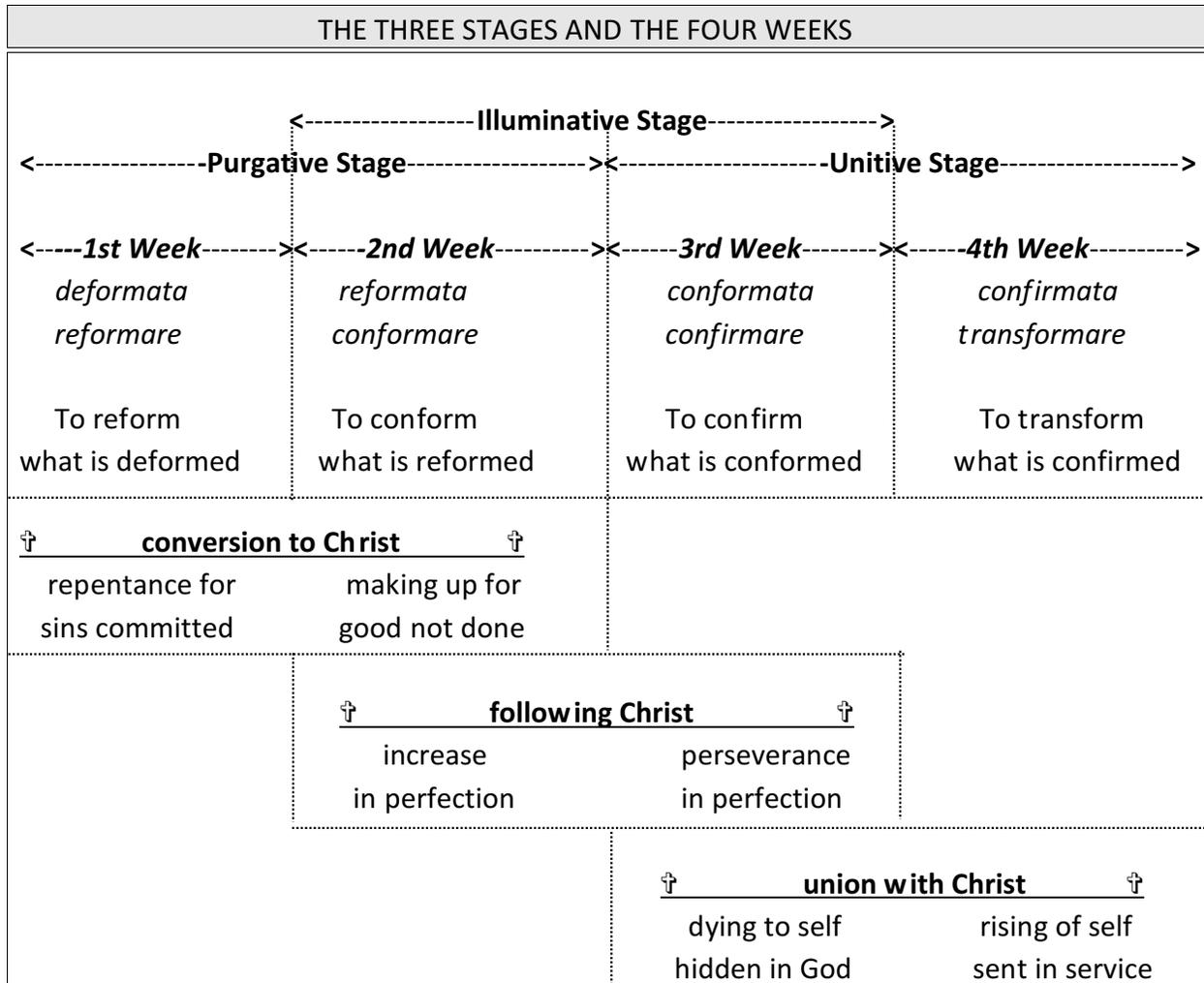
Ignatius does not give us a general treatise on spiritual progress but the framework for a retreat experience. His focus is narrower than that of the texts we have studied thus far: not just how to progress in the love of God, not just how to be permeated by that love as it calls us to reenter the world with compassion, but more precisely how to make well-ordered decisions on how specifically one is to serve the Lord. Entering into God's compassionate care for humanity is not added as a fourth stage; it is, as we will see, at the heart of Ignatius' spiritual process. In addition Ignatius stands out because of the centrality he gives to Jesus Christ in his four weeks. Christ was present in the earlier accounts of spiritual progress in the Western Church; in Richard's four degrees he plays a role in structuring the degrees as we move from the third degree (Christ being in the form of God) to the fourth (Christ taking on the form of a slave); the Exercises are seen as even more christocentric, especially if we note the role the earthly and risen life of Jesus plays in the second to the fourth weeks.

**3.1 The dynamic of the four weeks:** Again we will use a diagram (on the next page) as an aid to explain the progression envisaged by Ignatius. You will readily notice the four columns which divide up the diagram, and the row, at the top of the second block of the diagram, with First, Second, Third, and Fourth Week. Immediately beneath that row you will find a traditional description in Latin (*italic script*) of what the four weeks are about, with an English translation (*regular script*). We will begin there with our explanation of the dynamic of the four weeks.

**3.1.1 To reform what is deformed:** The first week of the Exercises, as Ignatius himself indicates, is the stage for beginners and features purgation. Exercitants come to it with their burden of sin and disordered attachments. They may be in need of a profound conversion from the disordered attachments which have enticed them away from God; or they may want to re-enter the conversion space so as to give their spiritual life a greater impetus. Thus they come with what is deformed in their being, and they open themselves to the grace of reformation.

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<sup>19</sup>Icf. SpExx # 10, where he links the first week to the purgative way, the second to the illuminative. One will note that he does not mention the unitive way. Such reference was not called for in this particular part of the SpExx. One may offer another hypothetical reason: Ignatius may not have worked out how to relate the unitive way to the last two weeks of his Exercises.



3.1.2 To conform what is reformed: The second week of the Exercises, as Ignatius suggests, is linked to the stage of illumination. Having undergone an experience of reformation in the first week, exercitants are now ready to build on their conversion, to foster the growth of virtuous activity which expresses the graces they have received. Since they have received forgiveness without any merit of their own, how can they return God's grace by a life of service in accord with God's will? More particularly, what concrete choices do they need to make, of a state of life, of a form of service, of ways of bettering their lives, in accord with God's will for them? This will be their response. The example given by Christ in his earthly life is their model, and from that model their path forward is illumined.

3.1.3 To confirm what is conformed: The third week of the Exercises moves exercitants to the stage of confirming whatever choice they have undertaken in the second week, that it might be not just an empty choice for the moment but a life-long commitment, like that of Jesus who chose a path in his ministry of faithful witness to the truth which led him to his passion and death. To implement any decision regarding the course of our lives requires patience and perseverance, the ability to meet and to surmount obstacles and temptations, and readiness to give up our lives. Here the model proposed for us is the passion and death of Jesus, which is featured in the third week.

3.1.4 To transform what is confirmed: The fourth week of the exercises moves exercitants to the other side of the paschal mystery, and they are invited to share the Christ's joy in rising from the dead, and to contemplate him as he exercises the role of consoler. The choice they have made and confirmed is transformed by the dynamic of the resurrection, in which Christ consoles his disciples, transforms them by giving them his Spirit of love, and missions them to bring consolation to one another and to all those they serve. This transformation is enhanced in the contemplation for obtaining love which immediately follows upon the fourth week and is intimately connected with it. Our chosen state of life, ministry, form of service is transformed in that we recognize that ultimately it is not us who act, but Christ. He is present, acting, even toiling in all those who with him are builders of God's reign.

3.2 **The Four Weeks and the Three Ways**: is there a way of linking the three classical ways and the four weeks of his SpExx? This theoretical question did not loom large for Ignatius. He quickly connected first week and purgation, second week and illumination. One might surmise that the third and fourth week together constitute the phase of union, or that illumination continues into the third week. But there is another way, more symmetrical and more holistic, of understanding this link. It is suggested by Gaston Fessard in his *Dialectique des exercices spirituels de S. Ignace de Loyola*.<sup>20</sup> It is presented in the diagram. You will note in the top part of the diagram that the purgative phase includes the first and second weeks, the illuminative the second and third weeks, and the unitive the third and the fourth weeks. There is no explicit evidence of Ignatius having seen things in this way, but this approach fits our reading of the text within the tradition. The move from purgative through illuminative to unitive is more complex and gradual than suggested by three cut-and-dry stages, and this approach allows for greater detail. It shows us how gradual is the move from what the purgative at the beginning to the unitive at the end. The second half of the diagram offers more detail on how each of the three ways can be divided into two parts and how the link takes place.<sup>21</sup>

3.2.1 The purgative phase begins with the conversion of the heart, in which exercitants examine their conscience, acknowledge the grave disorders that burden them, and seek forgiveness from God, in such a way that while they always remain sinners, they are now acutely conscious of being forgiven sinners, ready to respond to whatever God wants of them. This is the work of the first week. But then in the second week this conversion of the heart expands to the psyche and continues as the person enters into contact with the earthly life and ministry of Jesus and finds the courage to struggle against all the various manifestations and incitations of sin that remain within him or her. Thus purgation continues in the second

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<sup>20</sup>I will use Fessard's structure but fill in with my own content. I would note that the same tactic of providing overlaps is used by Richard of St. Victor, for example in his treatise on contemplation, *The Mystical Ark*.

<sup>21</sup>The two parts of purgation and of illumination are suggested by Richard of St. Victor's *Edict of Alexander*. The two parts of union are less clear in that work, but the movement from third degree to fourth degree of violent love is very helpful.

week, but is a more subtle affair.<sup>22</sup>

3.2.2 The illuminative phase corresponds to the contemplation of the earthly life and ministry of Jesus. The first phase of illumination takes place in the second week, devoted to the contemplation of the life and ministry of Jesus prior to his passion, death, and resurrection. The choices made by Jesus of a style of presence and ministry are there to illuminate the choices to be made by the exercitant who wishes to follow Jesus in the path of perfection and service. The second phase of illumination takes place in the third week, and there the issue is not so much making good choices in accord with God's will but persevering in choices already made, no matter what the cost, till the very end of one's life. The example of Jesus undergoing his passion and going to his death is crucial in this phase of the Exercises.

3.2.3 The unitive phase embraces both third and fourth week. It is the moment of communing with Jesus both in the paschal mystery in which he tastes the total abandonment of death and in the glory of his risen life. Exercitants are called to sorrow in deep union with Christ suffering and going to his death, and in the next phase, that of the fourth week, to joy in deep union with Christ gloriously alive and consoling his loved ones. It is at this point that the grace of union is accounted for in the Ignatian scheme. God's compassion is at the heart of this grace of union: the ultimate sacrifice presented for contemplation in the third week, the office of consoler in the fourth. The contemplation to obtain love brings this phase of the exercises to completion. If God's compassion is so beautiful, life-giving, attractive, the proper response Ignatius suggests is that we ourselves be compassionate not so much in word but in deed, entering into companionship and collaboration with God's toils for the world He has created and redeemed. The Ignatian ending resembles that of Richard's fourth degree of violent love.

3.3 Ignatius's Exercises present a pattern for structured spiritual experiences of prayer. A case can be made for this pattern applying as well to the repeated cycles of spiritual progression in our lives. People might find themselves in different spaces representing different phases of the Exercises, either in a purgative struggle, or progressing in the illuminative phase, or facing a key decision, or in a stage of suffering as the good resolves we have made meet obstacles of various kinds, or caught up in the grace of the resurrection and open to the gift of compassionate love, or even, in what corresponds to ordinary time, the lessening and blurring of the impulse of compassionate love because of the press of ordinary life with its events ever crowding in on us. A full 30 day retreat will normally cover all the phases of the SpExx; a shorter annual retreat may profitably begin where the person finds himself or herself within the cycle, with readiness to move further along the lines of what Ignatius suggests. But while all the schemes for spiritual progress on which we have reflected are helpful to us, God is not constrained by them. His is the final word.

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<sup>22</sup>This can be seen in comparing the rules of discernment in the first and the second weeks. Evil in the first week is blatant. In the second it is insidious, introducing an often subtle disorder in our way of pursuing an objective which in itself is good, which gradually distances us from God's grace.