

This is an encouraging book for all who desire a deeper relationship with God. Tom addresses our desire for intimacy—then, using the *Spiritual Exercises*, he guides us in a process of developing that relationship. Ultimately, this is a book about losing yourself so that you might find yourself in God. The list of creative ideas for continuing to nurture our relationship, found at the end of the book, is a wonderful addition to this work. I joyfully recommend it.

MACRINA WIEDERKEHR, OSB, author of *Abide: Keeping Vigil with the Word of God*

Relationship is front and center in *The Intimacy You Desire*. The gentle tone and sturdy content bring us back to what is authentically most important in our life. I always depart from Tom with a sense of encouragement and strength gained from our time together, and you will experience the same as you read and practice the principles in *The Intimacy You Desire*.

DR. PHILLIP MCCLURE, TH.D., speaker/facilitator - McClure Professional Services

Tom Elliott's new book has helped me understand why intimacy with God is my most genuine desire and how I can experience personal prayer by identifying the obstacles I put in the way. Now that I have read it once, I want to reflect on it slowly over several weeks in prayer; then I want to discuss it chapter-by-chapter with a group of companions. This is the most helpful guide I've seen for growing in a mutual relationship with God in order to live more purposefully and contemplatively.

STEPHEN J. BINZ, biblical scholar, speaker, and author of the *Threshold Bible Study* series

Tom Elliott's warm and user-friendly presentation of Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises* provokes my hunger for God. His transparency throughout the book emboldens me to seek and discover more intimacy in my relationship with the Divine. It's an excellent read.

REV. ANDREW J. ABRAHAM, M.DIV., pastor of Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church, Crossville, TN

The Intimacy You Desire is a helpful, practical guide for developing a mutual intimate relationship with God as one prays with the *Spiritual Exercises*. The many examples of Tom's own and others' life and prayer are very encouraging. Tom's own journey in praying with the "Third Week" is so honest and real. His transparency inspires others to be open and vulnerable in their relationship with Jesus. I highly recommend *The Intimacy You Desire* to anyone who desires a mutual, real, personal relationship with Jesus.

MAUREEN CONROY, RSM, D.MIN., author of *The Discerning Heart and Experiencing God's Tremendous Love*

In his friendly, down-to-earth book, Tom Elliott epitomizes the understanding of the heart of Ignatian Spirituality as he openly shares with us his journey into discovery of an authentic, intimate relationship with God. Since each chapter provides personal reflection questions, *The Intimacy You Desire* can be used not only for personal prayer but also holds great promise for vigorous discussions in faith-sharing groups, book clubs, and Lenten or Advent groups.

CINDY SHAW, M.MIN., co-director Emmaus House Spirituality Center, Des Moines, IA

Some books on the spiritual life come off as dry or over analytical: this one is a "page turner." From the very first, I was actually excited to continue to read it and to learn more about the ways of intimacy, mutuality, and friendship with God as taught by Saint Ignatius. Tom Elliott has a gift of making his subject come alive with many interesting stories from his own life and the lives of others. It's definitely a book that I will read and discuss with a group—and more importantly try to practice.

REV. DANNY SCHIEFFLER, M.DIV., rector of St. Mark Episcopal Church, Little Rock, AR

the
Intimacy
You
Desire

GROWING
IN LOVE WITH
GOD THROUGH
THE SPIRITUAL
EXERCISES OF
SAINT IGNATIUS

TOM ELLIOTT



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Introduction

New Orleans is known for many things; seminary is not one of them. Yet the Big Easy is where I spent four years of graduate school studying to be a priest. I heard and saw many new things during my four years at Notre Dame Seminary. For example, I heard the word “convocation” for the first time, which I assumed was just a fancy word for “lecture.” The priest who was in charge of the seminary would call all of us together for monthly convocations. Most of these were uneventful and relatively uninformative, but I’ll never forget the evening he lectured us about prayer.

After we gathered in the small room, the rector of the seminary addressed us, saying, “Gentlemen, if you’re struggling with your academics, we will get you a tutor, but if you’re not spending an hour a day in personal prayer, then you need to get out.” He emphatically and clearly expressed that prayer was more important than good grades. I took his words to heart and began spending an hour each morning in personal prayer.

I woke up every day at 5 AM and headed to the chapel, stop-

ping briefly at the cafeteria for a cup of coffee. I sleepily shuffled into the seminary chapel, my cup of java in one hand and my Bible in the other. Sitting down on one of the seemingly ancient wooden pews, I was enveloped in quiet darkness. After reading Scripture for a few minutes and sipping my coffee, I found myself bored and distracted, wondering what I was supposed to do next. Sometimes, I grabbed my rosary hoping to fill up the hour; other mornings, I played “Bible roulette,” randomly opening the word of God and hoping it would be exactly what I wanted to hear. Regardless of the method I used for prayer each morning, the bottom line was simple: I didn’t know how to pray. I simply tried to get through the sixty minutes so that I could get on with my day. I desired intimacy with God but wasn’t sure what that really looked like or how to reach it. I felt disconnected from God.

After being ordained a priest in June 1999, I continued to struggle with personal prayer. I quickly fell into a pattern of “binge praying,” avoiding prayer for several days and then binging for a few hours. During that time, my spiritual director, whom I met with each month, frequently questioned me about my prayer time. His concern was always expressed in a very particular, albeit peculiar, question, “Are you getting to happy hour every day?” “Happy hour” was his unique phrase for spending an hour in prayer. The phrase was cute and catchy—until we were in a crowded restaurant (in our priestly attire), surrounded by people who were already skeptical of priests. At such times, his loud question drew looks of shock and disgust from bystanders.

Sadly, month after month my answer to his question was, “Not every day.” By this I meant that I was praying once every few days, still unsure of what in the world I was supposed to be doing for an hour. This continued for the first few years of my priesthood

until, one day, a Protestant woman walked into my office and told me that she was being plagued by demons. Meeting her changed my prayer life in an unexpected way.

I'll never forget the day she sat across the desk from me, looking timid and nervous. Undoubtedly, this was the first time she had ever visited a Catholic priest, and she didn't know what to expect. All she knew was that she had reached out for help to countless others, and no one had been able to relieve her of the demons. After she shared her story with me, I scheduled a time to bless her house, since that is where most of the spiritual attacks had occurred. The house blessing, however, did not help.

My next step was to contact the exorcist for our diocese. He generously talked with me about the woman's situation and offered a couple of simple suggestions; however, his suggestions, like the house blessing, failed to help her. Frustrated, I contacted a religious community in Nebraska that was known for their knowledge of spiritual warfare. By the time I received their materials in the mail, I had been regularly meeting with the woman for more than a year.

The box they sent was filled with numerous books, pamphlets, and audiotapes. Rather than information about spiritual warfare, the majority of the materials was about spiritual formation. Unfamiliar with the concept, I thoroughly studied all of the materials and, instead of simply learning a technique to solve the woman's demonic troubles, I learned how to pray. While I was never able to help the woman find peace, I discovered within myself a deep desire for intimacy with God.

Prayer became more and more regular. It grew from sporadic to consistent, and from a few minutes a day to a nonnegotiable hour every day. During prayer, I heard God speak to me in new

and meaningful ways. As I grew in my relationship with God, I found myself excited each morning to get up and go to my prayer chair to spend time with him. I felt a deep sense that something important was happening in my life and in my relationship with God, but I really wasn't sure how it was happening. Something in the spiritual formation materials seemed to have healed my struggles with prayer and helped me feel more connected to God, but I didn't have a sense of exactly what had helped, at least not yet.

Shortly after my holy hour became a nonnegotiable experience every morning, Bishop Sartain offered me the opportunity to begin a three-year training program in spiritual direction. The training included extensive study of a retreat manual written by Saint Ignatius of Loyola known as the *Spiritual Exercises*. I wasn't familiar with Ignatius' writing, but as we studied it I realized the spiritual formation material that had helped me with my prayer was based on Ignatius' writing. I could see more specifically *how* the formation materials had helped me as I learned that the *Spiritual Exercises* reveal and encourage deepening levels of relationship with God and offer tools for relational prayer, leading to the apex of the *Exercises*—mutuality with God. Despite no longer being a priest, those tools continue to be essential to my intimacy with God.

My reason for writing *The Intimacy You Desire* is to help you discover the same thing—the intimacy you desire with God. You will be offered an opportunity to get to know Ignatius, read about the deepening levels of intimacy that he offers in the *Spiritual Exercises*, grapple with the scandalously intimate reality of God's desire for mutual love with us, and learn new ways to experience profoundly relational personal prayer. Words like intimate, mutual, and relational will become interchangeable descriptions of your personal prayer and relationship with God!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

I conclude each chapter in this book with reflection questions. These can be used during your personal prayer time or as spiritual formation in a small group. If you use them in a group, I recommend covering one chapter a week, with members of the group reading it individually and reflecting on the questions during personal prayer time. Then, at the group meetings each week, members can share their answers with one another.

1. What are the most significant moments in your life—emotionally, vocationally, and spiritually?
2. When was your most significant encounter with God? How did it change you?
3. When in your life did you feel like your prayer life was the most fruitful? Why?
4. When in your life did you experience profound dryness in your personal prayer time? How did you respond to the dryness?

CHAPTER ONE

Saint Ignatius of Loyola

I knew very little about Saint Ignatius of Loyola when I started the spiritual direction training program in 2003. The program, led by the Institute for Priestly Formation, helped me develop my personal prayer life, taught me the ministry of spiritual direction, and introduced me to one of the most significant people in my life today, Ignatius. There are countless amazing books written about the life and teachings of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, including his autobiography; therefore, I will not offer a complete survey of Ignatius's life in this book.¹ Instead, I

¹ Ignatius. *A Pilgrim's Journey: The Autobiography of Ignatius of Loyola*. Trans. Joseph N. Tylenda. Ignatius Press, 1991.



will offer a brief snapshot of his life, and then we'll look at the deepening intimacy he invites us to experience with God in and through the *Spiritual Exercises*.

Ignatius was born in 1491 at his family's castle of Loyola in Spain. As a young man, he was much like other men of his time, both in vice and in virtue. Ignatius enjoyed the common vanities of his day, including lofty dreams of winning glory and being famous. In order to accomplish those dreams, Ignatius entered the army in 1517. During a battle with the French in 1521, he was injured by a cannonball and was taken to the castle of Loyola to recuperate. In order to pass the time during his seven months there, Ignatius' sister-in-law offered the two books that were kept in the house—*Life of Christ* by Ludolph Saxony and *Lives of the Saints* by Jacobus de Voragine. These books helped turn his mind from fantasies of worldly chivalry and fame to hopes of spiritual greatness. Ignatius began to understand his life and purpose differently, and by the end of his recovery an interior spiritual conversion had begun.

In the years following his recovery and conversion, Ignatius journeyed to numerous countries, spending a tremendous amount of time praying and serving the poor. In his *Autobiography*, Ignatius describes some of the significant religious experiences he had during that time. One such mystical moment, which took place on the steps of a monastery, allowed Ignatius to experience the mutuality and unity of the Holy Trinity. Ignatius described the moment, writing in the third person: "His understanding began to be elevated so that he saw the Most Holy Trinity in the form of three keys. This brought on so many tears and so

much sobbing that he could not control himself...”² These “keys,” or *teclas* in Spanish, probably signify a musical chord, which is three notes, but one harmonious sound—a beautiful image of the Trinity and of unity. More than just an image, Ignatius’ prayer was an experience of the heart, an interior movement of God that permanently emblazoned him with knowledge of God’s unity and love.

In another mystical experience, Ignatius described something white, which emitted rays of light. According to what Ignatius wrote at the end of the *Spiritual Exercises*, this spiritual experience illustrated the generosity of God, who freely shares rays of himself—graces, virtues, and created gifts. Ignatius came to understand this generosity as an important part of the mutual intimacy that we desire—the sharing of goods and self.

These and other religious experiences humbly reminded Ignatius that God desires to share his goods and his very self with all of us. Ignatius never restricted such experiences to himself; rather, he believed that God desired to communicate in similar intimate ways with everyone. This belief found clear expression in the *Spiritual Exercises*, which he worked on from 1522 until 1540.

The sincerity and spirituality that flowed out of Ignatius and his writings drew followers to him, and they began to form a community. In 1534 Ignatius and some of his companions took vows to work for others and to live in poverty, and in 1537 they were ordained priests and moved toward founding a new religious order, the Society of Jesus.

As you might imagine, the founding members of the Society

2 Ignatius. pp. 37-39.

of Jesus elected Ignatius as the first superior general. Despite the fact that he turned down the election a couple of times, the Holy Spirit prevailed, and Ignatius accepted the position toward the end of 1540. For the next fifteen years, he focused his time and energy on administrative work for the Society while living in Rome.

In 2010, I had the privilege of visiting the house of the Gesù in Rome, where Ignatius lived and worked. While the house is not one of the popular pilgrimage sites in Rome, it is a great stop for those who love Ignatius. For example, a brief tour of the house reveals some relics of Ignatius' presence and work there, such as his desk, prayer books, one of the first editions of the *Spiritual Exercises*, and some clothes. In the corridor, there is also a painting of Saint Ignatius playing billiards with the viceroy of Spain. Legend has it that Ignatius told the viceroy that no game of pool was complete without a bet and proposed that the loser would have to do anything the winner wanted him to do for thirty days. Ignatius won, of course, and required the viceroy to go through the thirty-day retreat of the *Exercises*!

Undoubtedly, the greatest treasure Ignatius left us is the *Spiritual Exercises*. For more than four hundred fifty years, countless men and women—lay and religious, Catholic and non-Catholic—have been led through the *Exercises* either in a thirty-day silent retreat (four “Weeks”) or in the course of their normal daily lives. In the last few decades a growing interest and appreciation for the *Exercises* has developed, quite possibly because they offer us a glimpse of the intimacy with God that we so deeply desire.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What events in your life have caused you to be more aware of God?
2. What sins have hindered your acceptance of God's love?
3. What gifts and blessings have helped you to accept God's love?
4. What books, movies, songs, etc., have been instrumental in your spiritual journey?
5. Who are the people who have played the most significant role in your relationship with God? Why?

Intimacy in the Spiritual Exercises

Healthy relationships are not haphazard, but rather they involve our deliberate and conscious participation. Such active participation allows us to name and understand the nuances of relationships and have a sense of whether or not they're growing. As you might imagine, this is not always easy! For example, one of my directees shared with me his frustration with a friend of his. As he shared the story of their relationship, he realized that it was no longer a *friendship*, but a *ministry*. He described how all of the conversations with this presumed friend were always one-sided; there wasn't mutual sharing but only the other person's neediness.



Rather than being life-giving, the relationship was life-draining.

Through prayer and spiritual direction this man was able to accept that the relationship was a ministry instead of a friendship, which helped him to be more fully present to the other person without feeling used. It also helped him establish new boundaries that were healthy for ministry, rather than the boundaries typically expected in a friendship. Simply understanding the essence of the relationship created a place of great freedom and peace for him.

Naming and understanding our relationships can provide us with tremendous freedom, focus, peace, and energy. This is not only true in our human relationships, but also in our relationship with God, which can be understood and experienced in countless different ways, as we see in the gospels. People understood their relationship with Christ in ways that were antagonistic, needy, friendly, curious, close, mutual, deceitful, manipulative, or generous. They related to Jesus as if he was their benefactor, physician, companion, or friend, to name a few. Understanding and naming our relationship with God lets us savor and appreciate the nuances of that relationship, as well as grow in a desire for deeper intimacy.

The apex of relationship with God presented by Saint Ignatius of Loyola in the *Spiritual Exercises* is mutuality. Such intimacy does not happen magically or instantaneously but develops and deepens over time. The *Exercises* invite retreatants into that deepening relationship as each “Week,” or part, of the retreat offers a particular level of relationship with God. While Ignatius does not specifically name these levels of relationship, I found myself naming them as I finished the *Exercises*. As I entered into the mutuality of Week Four found in the “Contemplation to Attain