

Review Week

Pausing to Review the Graces We Have Received

Guide: Taking Stock



In the Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius urged directors of those making the Exercises to remind those making the retreat that it was important to “remain” where they “find fruit.” These past several weeks of the retreat have offered powerful graces. This review week does not take up new material. The material for this week’s reflection is the graces we have received over the past several weeks.

Following upon our experience of being loved as a sinner, we have had the grace of being invited to follow Jesus. We remember our personal response to follow him and our growing desire to know and be with this one who loves us so much. We have begun to let him tell us the story of God’s plan and his life. We reflected on his own call and how God prepared for his coming throughout the story of the covenant in the Hebrew Scriptures. We entered into the story of his parents, and those around them, as he came to us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Finally, we find ourselves there in the stable as he is born for us. This week of retreat is an invitation to remain there a while. Perhaps we have been too busy to take it all in. Perhaps we were not able to make the connection between his coming into the poverty of that stable and his coming into the poverty of our lives.

As we wake each morning this week, we will return to some grace for which we are grateful. It may be one grace all week. It may be simply making our home in that stable to be with Jesus there. The grace we desire this week is *to be drawn more deeply into the person of Jesus*. The resources for this week will help us get started, take us deeper, and help us find words to pray.

We will let our reflections find their way into the background of our everyday lives. Whatever we face, each day this week can become part of the mysteries we have been contemplating, if we let it all in. Any human experience is the human experience Jesus came to enter into. This week we see and love that coming more deeply.

Finally, each evening this week, we give thanks for the new graces we are receiving this week. For even a few moments—perhaps as we are undressing for bed—we can experience gratitude for the movements of our day that connect us with Jesus, who has come into our world—to be one with us in our human experience and to invite us to join him in his mission.

Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week

To get started this week, we must be clear about how different this week is from our previous weeks. This is a week to review, remain, and savor. We don't do this because we aren't interested in moving on but because we are interested in making sure we take in all that is being offered us. The analogy used here is not that of reading a good book and then pausing to read it all over again. A better analogy is this: A friend is showing me the family photo albums and is passing rather quickly over the early pages. I might slow my friend down and say, "Oh, these are wonderful. Let's take our time here. I really want to enjoy these pictures. Look at how young your mother looked. Is that the house you grew up in? Oh, my, the strength in your father's eyes. Oh, this picture just captures who you are, even as a baby."

Another way to describe what we are doing this week is to say we are praying, not with new material, but with the graces we have received these past weeks. I will take what I have been given and go into the gift more deeply, to remain there, to savor it. We do this because we know that gifts often contain further gifts within them. This week we will pick up the gifts we have received, and we will open them up to discover what more is being offered us.

We will do this deep appreciating of what we have received in the midst of our everyday busy lives. If the graces of these past weeks—call-and-response, a gifted sense of God's plan, how God becomes flesh for me—are to be gifts for my real life, then they will have meaning for and within my real life.

- I have said that I want to be with Jesus in his mission. Today I want to simply taste that choice with each and every task and choice of my day.
- I have understood how the Incarnation was God's prepared-for plan to save us. Today I want to consciously accept being in the flesh—including all its wonder and all the limits and diminishment of being a body-person. Concrete moments throughout the day will give me the opportunity to embrace who I am—with the body and identity I have inherited; with the choices I have made; with my physical condition, my health, my illness.
- I have seen and been touched by the Nativity. I have probably entered into this gifted contemplation of how Jesus became one of us, perhaps entering the scene, with those memories still fresh and moving. Today I want to walk around in my life sensing the tension in my culture to resist coming to, being in, a stable-like situation. I will notice—and in the background, chew over—just how much I enter into this world's efforts to cover over the simple, the naked, the poverty of human existence. Perhaps this week, I will consciously try to be myself, be more transparent. I might try to notice how a day would be if I tried not to impress others with things which are merely external, but to simply be with others with care.

Each day this week, I can find other ways to review, remain with, and savor more deeply the gifts God is offering me during this special journey to see Jesus more clearly, to love him more dearly, and to follow him more nearly, day by day.

For the Journey: Linger a While

Ignatius would have us stay a while within the poverty and humility of the stable. The child's birth begins a statement about who he is. These events and the conditions around us are important words here at the beginning of his long sentence of love.

As we sit watching, we might consider any anxiety we have about our being there. Presence is everything if we are going to become familiar with his ways. What's the hurry? We watch and listen. In our imaginations, perhaps our own loved ones come to visit us there. What would we tell them about the things to which we have been present? Perhaps we would feel in prayer that we wanted our old friends to

meet our new ones. Is there joy in our heart while we are walking quietly over to where Mary is holding the baby? Is there a reverent familiarity within us as we sit and talk with Joseph and our visitors?

There are ways to know facts and a different way we grow to know persons. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph are people and Ignatius would have us be a person and know personally those we meet here in the stable and all those whom we will see in the weeks to come. In the human process of becoming friends, we move through stages. It all begins with watching and listening and receiving whatever is being offered. We move to being acquaintances and then friends and then closer than that, partners or companions. These days we are available to be impressed by what we see and hear.

It is good for us to linger here and begin moving closer and closer not only to the crib and child but also to the personal reality of this earth-shaping event. What of the mysterious God is being manifested in this poor setting? The embrace of the loving God extends from the smallest cave to the largest planet. This God comes to everyone's stable if there is the emptiness there for a welcome. In a sense, after Bethlehem, there is nothing new to be seen but much to be understood. God's judgments are not our own. God's ways are higher and God's judgments of what is important are lower, and they meet in this lowly place where only the humble can see and believe.

So we sit for a while on a patch of straw and begin to admit. We admit him a little more each day into our own stables. We admit mystery and that we do not have it all figured out. We admit that we are loved in strange ways. We begin to admit that God's ways are beginning to attract us. We admit we need to stay here a little longer and watch our own spirits rise.

In These or Similar Words . . .

Dear Jesus,

I'm home. I'm gathered in this stable with you and Mary and Joseph. It's cold and smelly and I'm standing in cow manure and half wondering whether I didn't sit in some of it a while ago. And yet I feel so very quietly happy.

It seems like I usually feel like I'm not ready for you. At another time, I might have made you all wait outside before you came in, until I could sweep out the stable, get clean hay, scrape off the bottom of my shoes, and get some warm clothes for us all.

And I would want myself to be a better person. That's really what I see in the darkness of this stable, the darkness of my heart. I'm not just fretting about the surroundings, Jesus—it's *me*. Am I good enough to be in this place with you? It's only now as I look at you and your parents that I feel so deeply the love in this drafty, dark stable. Your tiny hands are still clutched in a newborn's fists, and when I hold out my finger, you grasp it tightly. My Lord and Savior is holding my hand! I am flooded with joy and tears that, at this moment, we are together in the kind of intimacy that has bonded humans since the beginning of time.

Dearest child Jesus, help me to peer beyond the dim light of this stable into the darkness of my own heart. Let me feel even more deeply that I really am at home here, in this place where my greatest accomplishment is holding my finger out for you to grasp. Help me to understand that you didn't come to be with me in any kind of unrealistic perfection but with me as I am right now, ankle deep in manure, tears streaking down my dusty face, and me joyfully smiling at your dozing parents as well as a cow and two oxen!

None of this seems to fit my well-ordered life, and yet here I am in this imperfect situation in what seems to be perfect happiness. My heart fills with so much gratitude to you, and I look down on your face with a deep love. Thank you for all you mean in my life. Thank you for coming to me, to all of us, as we are in our own stables, standing in the darkness, wondering what comes next.