

Let me introduce myself. I'm Donna Sytek and I've been a member of MQP for 46 years. Some of you will remember me as a long time state representative and Speaker of the House. I wanted to share with you the story of my experience with the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius.

It will involve a Hollywood sound stage, physical therapy, and automobile transmissions.

I grew up in Haverhill in a large Catholic family, where we prayed the family rosary and attended daily Mass. I had 16 years of Catholic education, so I know all kinds of Catholic trivia and hundreds of hymns—many in Latin. I have taught CCD, spoken at Catholic conferences, chaired projects for the Bishop and served on the board of Catholic Charities. From all appearances I was a fully engaged practicing Catholic.

And yet, I felt empty. Like a Hollywood sound stage with realistic building facades but nothing behind them, I felt like a fraud. When I mentioned this to Fr. Tom, he recommended I enroll in the Spiritual Exercises that was being offered here at MQP.

Over 500 years ago St. Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuits, used his personal experience of spiritual insight, and gathered it into a framework of a retreat to be offered over 30 days and called them the spiritual exercises.

Since most of us can't take a month off for a retreat like our Jesuit friends, the program is run once a week for 30 weeks. Starting last October I joined about two dozen other people every Saturday morning. We broke into small groups to learn and practice a new way of relating to God.

With Fr. Tom as our leader we committed to spend an hour a day in prayer, structured in the way that St. Ignatius had found worked. Hmm. A whole hour? For prayer? Seemed like a lot for a lay person like me. But then I thought about how long I spend every day reading newspapers, political blogs, and watching silly videos on Facebook.

Moreover, I spend a significant amount of time every day on physical therapy for my neuromuscular disease. I exercise the parts of my body that still work in hopes of maintaining my physical health. Why wouldn't I do the same for my spiritual health?

I'll admit, it was hard to get into it in the beginning. My prayer life used to consist of attending Mass, reciting the prayers I learned as a child, and occasionally praying for a special intention. I had a devotion to the Blessed Mother, but had no real relationship with Christ.

But just as physical therapy you have to stretch outside your comfort zone to increase your range of motion or lift weights to regain your strength, the Spiritual Exercises put you into uncomfortable or unfamiliar territory. For example, I was a never big into the Bible. The rosary and Mass, yes. Sacred Scripture not so much.

The touchstone of each day is a reading from the Bible or from St. Ignatius own writings. As I forced myself to contemplate each passage –an hour is a long time—I found a new personal relationship with God. I began to appreciate how he became human and gave his life for my redemption. I felt his love for me and developed a personal relationship with him, calling him by his name Jesus, which I had never done before.

As we worked through the exercises I was forced to contemplate my own sinfulness, and recognized that God loves me no matter what. My eyes were opened to all the little and big ways he intervenes in my life as signs of his love. When a parking space opens up in a crowded lot, I say thank you, Jesus. When I break my ankle but don't need a cast, thank you Jesus.

I have learned to accept his will for me whether it involves good or bad news. When I fall and sustain an injury, or lose a friend to cancer, I know that he always acts in my best interest even when it doesn't feel that way. I am conscious of his presence in my daily life, and try to become more like him in everything I do.

Now that the series is over, I still do my daily scripture reading and contemplation. Instead of being a chore, it has become my happy place. It is a time when I can put the worries and troubles of the day aside, and enter a bubble with just me and Jesus. I listen to what he wants of me that day and ask for the grace to do it.

I don't feel empty any more, but filled with God's love.

If you think your spiritual life could use a tune up or even a new transmission, I encourage you to consider signing up for Spiritual Exercises this fall.

Think about, pray about it, and the Holy Spirit will inspire you to do something about it.

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