

THREE WAYS, FOUR DEGREES AND FOUR WEEKS?

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IGNATIUS LOYOLA CAREFULLY REVIEWED whatever happened when, in his earlier pilgrim years, he directed others in prayer. He gradually devised a set of notes on the helpful patterns he discovered, and this led to the four weeks of the spiritual journey he proposed to those he felt were ready. These notes matured into a short book of *Spiritual Exercises* to guide future directors, a book whose impact has been invaluable.

What influences shaped his approach? There are many. By his time in the western Church there had emerged a classic pattern of spiritual progress (beginner, proficient, perfect), further described as three ways (purgative, illuminative and unitive). This pattern Ignatius knew at least from his studies in Paris.

What, then, is the relationship between the three ways and Ignatius' four weeks? This question is raised by Gaston Fessard in the first volume of his *La Dialectique des Exercices Spirituels de Saint Ignace*, and he offers significant clues.¹ But a prior question can be raised. Can we find any harbingers of an earlier fourfold pattern in spiritual progress? We will examine the work of a twelfth-century prior of an abbey of canons regular, Richard of St Victor, whose influence on Ignatius, if any, we have not been able to document. His treatise on *The Four Degrees of Violent Love* was quite influential in the later centuries of the Middle Ages. Does it shed any light on how to give the four weeks of the Ignatian exercises?

¹ Gaston Fessard, *La dialectique des Exercices Spirituels de Saint Ignace* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1956).

Richard of St Victor: An Early Four Stage Pattern

Richard of St Victor (1110–1173) was a member of the Abbey of St Victor, which flourished in Paris in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This abbey was not a typical monastic foundation somewhere in the wilderness 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 role in building up Paris as a centre of theological study. Its members were not monks but canons regular. 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.² Richard was a spiritual guide, probably a novice master, for a time prior of his abbey, and he wrote abundantly in the area of spirituality.

The Four Degrees of Violent Love:

This is perhaps Richard's most innovative work.³ For him, love makes a violent entrance and wrenches human beings as it progresses through its different stages. A love oriented towards what is less than God is not only wrenching but also 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 in God.

Richard's first three degrees have a clear affinity with purgation, illumination and union. The fourth, returning to the world as a vehicle

² Priests in the Society of Jesus, founded in the sixteenth century, were clerks regular: apostolic religious without the obligation of praying the office in common. Would this shared apostolic bent have something to do with the four-stage pattern espoused by both Ignatius and Richard? Even without dependence of Ignatius on Richard, they may well have developed their four stages in a parallel response to a similar context.

³ Richard of St Victor, *On the Four Degrees of Violent Love*, translated by Andrew B. Kraebel, in *On Love, A Selection of Works of Hugh, Adam, Achard, Richard, and Godfrey of St Victor*, edited by Hugh Feiss (Brepols: Turnhout, 2011). Other spiritual works from his pen are widely read and appreciated, such as his *Benjamin Major* (or *The Mystical Ark*) and *Benjamin Minor* (or *The Twelve Patriarchs*), translated in the Library of Christian Classics (Paulist Press: Mahwah 1979). A lesser-known work, the *Edict of Alexander*, translated by J.-M. Laporte, is available at [orientations.jesuits.ca/rsv edict.pdf](http://orientations.jesuits.ca/rsv%20edict.pdf). In these works, 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 vistas, but they can't be easily woven together in a totally coherent and seamless whole.

of God's own compassion, is Richard's creative contribution to our understanding of the spiritual journey.

THE SELF	Degree One Purgation	Degree Two Illumination	Degree Three Union	Degree Four Compassion
In movement	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
At prayer	I enter in meditation	I rise in contemplation	I am introduced into jubilation (ecstasy)	I go out in compassion
In thirst	my restless soul thirsts for God	I thirst to journey towards God	I thirst to be absorbed into God	I thirst as God thirsts
Towards transformation	I am elevated to my true self	I am elevated to God	I am transformed into the form of God: <i>death of the old self</i>	I am transformed into the form of the servant: <i>resurrection of the new self</i>
Towards outpouring	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
In relationship	engagement	marriage	intercourse	pregnancy/ children

This diagrammatic presentation traces in an abbreviated and somewhat adapted form the gist of Richard's teaching on how to progress through these four degrees. The rows represent various aspects of this progression as described by Richard, and the columns each of the four degrees.

The Self in Movement: This depicts the dynamic movement of persons going through the process of love's violent entry. The first step is entering into oneself, reflecting on oneself and one's situation, in imitation of the prodigal son as he began his process of return to his father and his conversion (Luke 15:17 following). Then one journeys towards God, which is a good description of the lengthy process of sanctification and illumination. In the state of union human beings are forgetful of self and absorbed into God to the extent possible in this earthly existence. But this is not the final state. One leaves the ecstasy of whatever experience of union one has received, goes out of oneself and lowers oneself in compassionate service of others.

The Self at Prayer: The second row gives us Richard's sense of the types of prayer that characterize each degree.⁴ The first is meditative prayer, in which the mind moves in disciplined and fruitful reflection, akin to the type of prayer *for* which Ignatius calls in the First Week of the Exercises. The second is contemplative prayer, in which the mind rests in a penetrating and synoptic gaze, akin to the desired outcome of the prayer of imagination proposed by Ignatius for the Second Week.⁵ In the third degree one is totally drawn out of oneself into God for periods of ecstasy.⁶ In the fourth degree, one goes out in compassion, a compassion that returns one to the hurly burly of daily existence. It is

⁴ Richard suggests a clear classification of the types of prayer in *Mystical Ark* 1.3. Prior to prayer there is the unfocused to and fro of consciousness, without labour and without fruit; meditation entails the effort of disciplined thought, with labour and with fruit; finally contemplation, the gift of a penetrating gaze, is without labour but bears much fruit. Later he suggests that ultimately contemplation draws the mind out of itself in a form of alienation (5.2).

⁵ This outcome is most clearly expressed in Exx 254, where Ignatius instructs retreatants to remain where they have found and continue to find fruit, even for the whole hour of prayer. There is also the practice of revisiting key moments of consolation in earlier prayer, and of applying the senses. Times of consolation are very precious and often bring a deep simplification to the overall prayer experience.

⁶ Reaching total and unending ecstasy in the presence of God would be definitive salvation, which occurs after death. Persons in the third degree of union in this life have an affinity for unitive prayer, can enter into it with relative ease and live more and more in the presence of God, but they must still at times focus on their human life and its needs. Many describe periodic periods of inner darkness which test them and bring them to an even deeper union, a more profound ecstasy.

akin to the descent, beckoned by Jesus, from the mount of transfiguration, or the descent described by Plato into the cave to help liberate those still caught up in shadows. This compassion is not a form of distraction but is grounded in the union with God which pertains to the third degree and continues it. Caught up in God, I cannot help but be caught up in his compassion, and I am drawn to the areas of concern that he points out to me. There are outstanding examples of mystics who entered into periods of intense activity, with profound effects on the life of the Church, such as St Bernard of Clairvaux, St Catherine of Sienna and St Ignatius of Loyola.

The Self in Thirst. Now we focus on the scriptural theme of thirst (to be found, for example, in Psalm 42), but whereas in the first three degrees one thirsts for God, in the fourth degree one begins to thirst as God thirsts, in compassion for broken creation and sinful humanity which needs healing. When Jesus says ‘I thirst’ on the cross he demonstrates that God really thirsts for us. In an Ignatian vein, rather than labouring to find God, in this fourth degree I allow God to labour through me, and I share in God’s labour, God’s thirst.

The Self towards Transformation: In the last two degrees, Richard focuses on the death and resurrection of Christ:

... who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form (Philippians 2:6–7).

Humans who have reached the third degree, that of union, find themselves absorbed into God, and in that sense, they die to their own selves and are found in the form of God. But just as Jesus did not cling to the form of God, choosing to live in our world of struggle, violence and ambiguity, so too those who reach a felt union with God are invited to go beyond it in self-emptying, compassion and servanthood. In doing so they deeply and deliberately assume their messy human selves in a messy human situation, transformed by God’s own compassion. God is no longer simply seen as object of their desire. God dwells in them and in them desires salvation for every human being. Union is not forsaken but lived out in a new way.

The Self towards Outpouring: Here the last two degrees use another image to point to the same reality. 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 that I have built to assert and defend myself needs to be dissolved (third degree), so that I might pour myself out in selfless service (fourth degree), fitting into a mould of God's making.

The Self in Relationship: A clear progression can be seen in the area of marriage and conjugal love. Notable is the passage from ecstatic union in intercourse to the many interruptions and exhaustion from raising children to which it can lead. Similarly, in Richard's work on the Trinity, the love between two persons is incomplete: it must lead into the complexities of welcoming another or others into the circle, thus forming a community.⁷

The four degrees of violent love are not Richard's only contribution to the understanding of spiritual progress. An earlier work, *The Edict of Alexander*, (cf. note 3) adheres to the classical three stages, which he describes using the image of the three major liturgical processions that punctuate the life of his abbey: the processions for the feasts of the Purification, of Palm Sunday and of the Ascension. These stages are not monoliths. Richard's description of them is dynamic, rich and colourful. The first stage begins with cleansing our iniquity and moves on to overcoming our negligence (4.1). The second stage begins with eagerness for perfection, but this must be fulfilled in perseverance (3.6). In the third stage he develops a movement towards prophecy of some who enjoy union (3.11), which adumbrates the fourth of his degrees of violent love. The image this suggests is not that of steps with clear transitions and sharp ascents, but that of a melding of degrees and of gradual ascents from one to the next.

Richard within the Tradition: A Broader Perspective:

The Apostle Paul offers a clear antecedent to Richard's transition from absorption into God (the third degree of violent love) to compassion

⁷ See Richard of St Victor, *On the Trinity*, 3.15, translated by Christopher P. Evans, in *Trinity and Creation: A Selection of Works of Hugh, Richard and Adam of St Victor*, edited by Boyd Taylor Coolman and Dale M. Coulter (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010).

for the world (the fourth degree). The key passage is Philippians 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 found in Romans 9:3: ‘for I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people’. Thus, Richard’s fourth degree has good biblical foundations.

The Victorine canons regular professed a life of both contemplation and action. In their case contemplation was to issue in preaching and teaching. Later in the thirteenth century Franciscans and Dominicans followed a similar pattern, but in a more itinerant mode. Thomas Aquinas, the eminent theologian of the early Dominicans, vindicated their style of religious observance, when 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 is more necessary for you.*’ (Philippians 1:23–24) 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.⁸

The Four Weeks of Ignatius

How do Ignatius' four Weeks connect with the traditional three ways? Ignatius refers only to the purgative and illuminative ways, connecting them with the First and the Second Week respectively (Exx 10). The *Official Directory of the Exercises* published in 1599 extends the illuminative way to the Third Week and describes the Fourth Week as unitive.⁹ In Gaston Fessard's *La dialectique des Exercices Spirituels de Saint Ignace* each way plays a key role in two successive Weeks: the purgative way in both First and Second Weeks, the illuminative in both Second and Third, the unitive in both Third and Fourth.¹⁰ We will follow Fessard's structure, but enriched by Richard's description of his third and fourth degrees.

Richard reflected more broadly on patterns of spiritual progress, whereas Ignatius chose a narrower focus, that of a retreat experience focused on Christ and designed to help exercitants make a well-ordered election, a grace-inspired decision on how they are to serve the Lord in his mission. For Fessard this election is the pivotal point of the Exercises. Indeed, at the heart of the Exercises is discovering and implementing the role God uniquely desires for each one of us. But in the background, there is an underlying spiritual dynamic similar to that developed by Richard.

⁸ *De caritate*, 11.6. The text is from the disputed question *On Charity*, translated by Lottie H. Kendzierski, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1960). Also, *Ila-IIae* 24 9 c. In his writing Aquinas does not allude to Richard's four degrees., but he does to Richard's writing on the Trinity.

⁹ Dir 43:39.

¹⁰ Fessard, *La Dialectique des Exercices Spirituels de Saint Ignace de Loyola*, volume 1, 214–221, summarised in figure 10 (insert at the back of the book). As we have seen, Richard of St Victor offers a foretaste of this overlapping pattern in his *Edict of Alexander* (see above footnote 3 and p. xxx. Thomas Aquinas, *De Caritate*, 11, ad 6.

The Dynamic of the Four Weeks: The integration of the three ways and the four weeks involves some overlapping: the first week is purgative, the second both purgative and illuminative, the third both illuminative and unitive, the fourth unitive. This adds a complexity to each of the three ways which, as we have seen, Richard of Saint Victor explored in his earlier *The Edict of Alexander*.

First Week: To Reform What Is Deformed. The First Week of the Exercises, as Ignatius himself indicates, is for beginners and is wholly purgative. Exercitants ponder the gravity of sin, enter into themselves to examine their conscience, acknowledge their own role in the dynamic of sin, and seek forgiveness from God. Acutely conscious of being forgiven sinners, they are ready to respond to whatever God wants of them. They may be in need of a profound conversion, of freedom from the disordered attachments which have enticed them away from God; or they may want to re-enter the space of conversion so as to give their spiritual life a greater impetus. They come with what is deformed in themselves, and open themselves to the grace of reformation.

Second Week: To Conform What Is Reformed. The Second Week of the Exercises, as Ignatius suggests, is linked to the illuminative way. Having undergone an experience of reformation in the First Week, exercitants are now ready to build on their conversion and to seek greater conformity to Christ as they grow in virtuous activity. More particularly, 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? What concrete choice do they need to make, in accord with God's will for them, of a state of life, of a form of service, of a way to better either or both? Making this choice, this election, will be their response. The example given by Christ in his earthly life is the model they contemplate, and this model illumines their path forward.

Yet, while illumination begins in this week, the purgative way continues. The First Week conversion of the heart expands to the psyche, as exercitants enter into contact with the earthly life and ministry of Jesus and find the courage to uncover and struggle against all the various manifestations and incitations of sin that remain within them. This expansion can be seen in the Two Standards, or 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, a disorder which gradually distances us from God's grace.

Third Week: to Confirm What Is Conformed. The Third Week of the Exercises moves exercitants to confirm whatever choice they have made in the Second Week, that it might be not just an empty choice for the moment but a lifelong commitment like that of Jesus, who chose a path in his ministry of faithful witness to the truth—a choice 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. In this week the model proposed for us is the passion and death of Jesus. Thus, it is easy to grasp why the 1599 Official Directory states that the illuminative way continues in the Third Week. Our path is illumined by Christ's example not only in what choice we make but also in how we live it out to the end.

At the same time this week marks the emergence of the unitive way. Ignatius' pressing call is to unite ourselves with Christ in his passion, to ask for sorrow with Christ in sorrow, anguish with Christ in anguish (Exx 203).¹¹ Just as Christ's divinity hides itself in his passion and death (Exx 196) so too—and this is a point made by Richard—we must allow our humanity to hide itself, to be liquefied, absorbed into God's love, a love most fully manifest in His death for us on the cross. This is union at its most intimate.

Fourth Week: To Transform What Is Confirmed. The Fourth Week of the Exercises moves exercitants to the other side of the paschal mystery. As with Christ's sorrow in the Third Week, now in the Fourth

¹¹ Often enough directors of the Exercises notice a shift in their retreatants from Second to Third Week. The imaginative use of the five senses in the Second Week is usually more complex, and the accounts given by directees longer, but as one moves into the Third Week the prayer is often simpler. Sights and sounds are less prominent and spiritual taste and fragrance predominate. Just being there take less time to describe. Indeed, in both Second and Third Weeks the rule expressed in Exx 254 is very helpful. If retreatants find the Lord at a certain moment in their prayer, they are to stay there rather than continue with what they had planned earlier. These are the precious periods of contemplative fruit which requires no concomitant effort. Thus, the transition from meditation to more contemplative and unitive prayer is gradual.

they are invited to share Christ's joy in rising from the dead, to move from contemplating how the divinity hides itself to how it manifests itself (Exx 221, 223). This parallelism shows how the unitive movement continues in the Fourth Week.

There is, however, a further instruction in the Fourth Week (Exx 224) with no counterpart in the Third: 'Consider the office of consoler that Christ our Lord exercises and compare it with the way in which friends are wont to console each other'. Consolation for Ignatius is a broad term: it is the gift of a grace uniquely suited to its recipient: enlightenment, affective experience, effective decision in accord with God's will, and/or endurance to the end. We note in the assigned contemplations of the Fourth Week that the risen Christ consoles his disciples not only in helping them with their grief and discouragement, but in bringing them to the point where they are able to continue His mission in His absence. His compassion for them is broad and deep, and in effect teaches them how to have compassion for those to whom they will be sent.

The power of the resurrection, the gift of consolation, and the mission of compassion are integral to each other. For Richard union blossoms into compassion, for Ignatius it blossoms into mission. In both cases there is a re-entry into the messiness of the world. In this way the election confirmed in the Third Week is transformed in the Fourth: it becomes subsumed into a vast movement in which God not only creates, but is present to creation, and labours to bring it to its fulfilment. The understanding of this transformation is enhanced in the Contemplation to Attain 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 recognise that ultimately it is not we who act, but Christ who acts through us. He is present, acting, even toiling in all those who, with Him, are builders of God's reign.

A Path of Progress

What overall lessons can one learn from reflecting on the three ways of spiritual progress (an earlier but perduring tradition), the four degrees (Richard), and the four weeks (Ignatius)?

All three patterns delineate a path of progress. This progress, however, can be interpreted in an unhelpful way, more like going up

the steps of a staircase and less like a gradual ascent up an incline. Moving from one degree (or Week) to the next can be, but is not usually, like an instantaneous jolt. The degrees blend into one another, and this is helped by the overlapping, as we have seen, between the three ways and the four Weeks. The ways, degrees and weeks are distinct, but not by walls of separation but by osmotic membranes.

Ignatius offers us an important clue to a deeper understanding of all three patterns. The pattern of weeks that he offers us in his *Spiritual Exercises* comes out of careful reflections and notes on his own experience of what usually worked in his many spiritual encounters. Yes, the Spirit is at work in his encounters and subsequent reflections, but his book is not a heavenly command to be followed to the letter, a straitjacket for both director and directee. Based on his many experiences, it offers a starting point for directors, a default option, and allows great freedom because they must pay close attention to how the Spirit leads them and each one of their directees. The ultimate directive is for the director to get out of the way and let the Spirit take over, at times in ways that go beyond the patterns carefully delineated by Ignatius. In current French language usage, one does not so much direct as accompany the Exercises. Likewise, Richard's degrees and the traditional three ways are but broad but helpful indications of how one might progress towards fulfilment in God. Ultimately God sets the pattern, unique for each human person.

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