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Gone Before Us

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Gone Before Us

All of us have family members and friends who have died, who have “gone before us” beyond our present environment of both time and space. We are left in our familiar surroundings where one moment moves irrevocably to the next, and where no one of us can be completely present in two places at the same time. For us, thinking about deceased friends and relatives can be a source of sadness, but can also be directed to gratitude. When we are ready to reflect on what we have gained rather than what we have lost, we are in a position to experience a privileged source of joy.

One of the most highly recommended Ignatian spirituality exercises is a “gratitude reflection,” when we take a few minutes to allow occasions that elicit gratitude to come to mind from the recent past. The exercise depends upon us to the extent that we deliberately choose to make time available, but the most important part is consciously opting for intuition, grace, or inspiration to move within us in the selecting of memories, thoughts, and their accompanying feelings. Any spiritual exercise is at least implicitly a cooperative movement, never exclusively ours alone.

In a setting such as a gratitude reflection, or at any time when we freely decide to focus our attention on some of those who have “gone before us,” we are very likely to discover or to acknowledge with renewed delight, some of the gifts we have received from these persons who are significant influences from our past.

We have received the gift of life, whether or not we have had weak or strong affective bonds with our ancestors. We are alive, having been born through specific family heritages. We did not create ourselves, and no matter how many limitations we experience, we have the interior freedom to make decisions that are uniquely ours. Memories might arise of both joy and suffering, of being loved as we wanted and the opposite, but at this moment, we are alive. We can consider among many of the wonders of being alive, that we are capable of giving and receiving love, and that “love does not come to an end.” All this is only possible because we are part of an ancestry granted to us without any effort on our part.

Though we are responsible for what we do with what we have received from others, some particular individuals come easily to mind when we look into our past for especially beneficial influences. Some were classroom teachers, with whom we had frequent contact over extended periods of time. Others, we encountered only briefly, but whether their ways of communicating, or our manner of perceiving, or both, some individuals have had profound positive effects in our lives. For example, I recall an elderly friend of the

family who let me, a teen-ager who had recently received a driver's license, use his car for a time when he was away – a significant act of respect and trust in me which elicited a strong sense of maturing responsibility for which I am now quite grateful. He has “gone before me,” but I am definitely the richer for remembering his influence in my life.

Whether or not we see ourselves in need of some positive thoughts and feelings, whenever we consider the gifts we have received from those who have gone before us, we experience them anew to our increasing profit.