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"The St. Ignatius Diet"

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“The St. Ignatius Diet”

Most of us understand a diet as a process for losing weight. When Ignatius of Loyola offered some guidelines about eating and drinking as part of his little book, *The Spiritual Exercises*, his concern was not about weight, and certainly not about waistline, but to bring consciously into our relationship with God an aspect of our lives that we might otherwise omit. Praying and reflecting are spiritual exercises that enable us to draw closer to God. Choosing what we will eat and drink can also be a means of deepening our intimacy with God.

Sharing meals is one of the prime ways we grow closer to family, friends, associates – anyone we trust. On some occasions, we will say a blessing before a meal: an implicit indication that we wish God to be a participant. Ignatius would suggest that decisions we make prior to coming to table can be as much or more a means of including God in our eating and drinking than a brief prayer of thanks at the time we begin a meal.

What if we were to make up our minds after lunch, as to the kind of meal that we and Our Lord would agree on for dinner? Even a moment of reflection would allow us to be inspired in our choice of quality and quantity, before appetite could affect our judgment. From the perspective of mere human logic, we can probably make better dietary choices before we are hungry than when our blood sugar has hit bottom and we are ready to consume anything that looks tasty. But in terms of spirituality, bringing God into the choices we make about food and drink engages us in a highly personal encounter that fosters mutual love.

When we plan a meal for others, we want to provide not only fine quality, but the kinds of food and drink that will be most suitable. The better we know our guests, the more we will take into account their preferences. Some do not drink alcoholic beverages, some do not eat meat; one might have an allergy to one kind of food, and another, an aversion to a certain vegetable. We adjust what we will offer at our table or in our selection of a place to eat, according to our knowledge of others. If we were to consider for a moment, even before we go to a meal, that we are guests invited by God who knows us better than we know ourselves, we could think about what kind of food and drink God might want to provide for us.

Would God set forth more food than we really need, or the kind of drink that would cause us harm? God knows us well enough to take

into account matters that we would not consider when planning a menu for even those who are closest to us. God sees from within us the areas of our eating and drinking habits that are sometimes ruled not by reason or by free choice but by those that are not truly in our best interests. If we let God guide us as to quantity and quality of food and drink before we are under the sway of our habitual response to appetite, we have a good chance of making choices that will nourish us in body and in spirit.

The basic premise of the "St. Ignatius Diet" is that we want to let God be with us in even the ordinary every-day decisions about what we will eat and drink. The love that God has for us encompasses every aspect of our lives. We often pray that we will be granted "our daily bread." Ignatius suggests that we would also do well to bring our specific, personal eating and drinking decisions to our relationship with God. There are no restrictions on this "diet;" rather, it is open to what we know and continue to learn about ourselves and the world about us, including such things as solidarity with the poor, respect for those who provide our food, world food economics, and the spirituality of dealing with our appetite.

Many of us are not at a place in our relationship with God where we can pause for a moment, and "receive" the next meal's menu. Rather, we start off with a simple presupposition that eating and drinking a little less than appetite would urge, will be to our benefit. We choose to eat less quantity of food than we are accustomed to take, and of a more plain quality, and we drink more water and ordinary beverages than those that might appeal to us. We are the ones who decide what to eat and how much to consume, but we seek to counterbalance the force of appetite, pushing us always towards "more and better." We do not want to become diet faddists, but neither do we want to be under the compulsion of some unconscious factors that do not respect our full humanity or the purpose of our existence.

We will know that we are participating well in the "St. Ignatius Diet" when we reflect on our experience, and recognize that an abiding sense of peace accompanies the decisions we make and their effects upon us. If we were to engage in eating and drinking behavior that does not match God's love and care for us, we would sense some disturbance of spirit in our reflections.

Whether we regularly reflect on the choices we make about each and every meal, or occasionally respond to a gentle inspiration with regard

to our eating and drinking, we might be pleased with our personal experience of the "St. Ignatius Diet."