

God's Field Hospital



SAMPLE

# God's Field Hospital

Ignatian Spiritual Exercises  
Healing Wounds of Life

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Dedication

*To the givers of these exercises  
and those creating field-hospital churches  
on the frontlines of hurt and sorrow.*

SAMPLE

*The Church must be like a field hospital that  
cleans and heals wounds.*

*This is the mission of the Church: The Church heals, it cures.  
Sometimes, I speak of the Church as if it were a field hospital.  
It's true: there are many, many wounded!*

—Pope Francis,  
“Homily at Mass in Santa Marta,”  
February 5, 2015

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# Foreword

In August 2013, when I first interviewed Francis, he had been elected pope only a few months, but from the first moments of our meeting, I sensed that he was communicating a very strong and lucid vision of the church and its mission in the world, the fruit of his pastoral and spiritual experience. I recognized in his words the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, especially that meditation in which Ignatius invites us to contemplate the wounded world, and the decision of the divine Persons who say to each other, “Let us redeem humanity,” which brought forth the incarnation.

The pope said, “I see clearly that the thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal the wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful, with closeness and proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously wounded person if he has high cholesterol and high sugar! One must treat his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds....” The pope also repeated this to the parish priests of Rome on March 6, 2014: “You will do the specialized care, but first you must heal the open wounds.” He has repeated this appeal on other occasions as well. These important words resonate today in a broken, divided, and wounded world, and they are full of meaning.

Clearly, however, this work of rescue and salvation does not consider the “wounded” as completely lacking in capacity to react or merely as a dying person. The frequent images Bergoglio draws from the world of health care need to be developed. For the pope, “we cannot cure a sick person if we do not start from what is healthy about him.” And that means starting from the positive, from the resources that are still available, from an openness to grace that has not been affected, from health care that is not incurably undermined. In short, ensuring that our freedom and ability to act and react has not been sapped. Francis has great confidence in the positive resources of our humanity.

This confidence always makes me reflect on an event in Francis’s life that is connected to his attitude of “care,” even in the medical sense: before entering the seminary, Jorge Mario Bergoglio became seriously ill and at the age of twenty-one almost died of a lung infection. In a moment of high fever, he hugged his mother in despair, saying, “Tell me what is happening to me!” He was diagnosed with pneumonia and the presence of three cysts. Because of this, the upper part of his right lung was removed. The convalescence was hard because of the method of draining the fluid that had formed in his lungs. I imagine what it could mean for a young man to feel short of breath, to need immediate care, to need relief. I believe that this, in some way, shaped Pope Francis’s great and deep human and spiritual sensitivity.

Michael Hansen’s book *God’s Field Hospital* is a very important contribution to exercise one’s spiritual gaze and feel the healing power of the gospel both in one’s own life and in the life of the world. It constitutes an itinerary that personally involves those who undertake it, requiring full personal participation. What one needs to desire and ask in the journey, then, is to feel the healing power of God’s grace personally and to be of service to the world as people who help heal wounds.

One of the most heartfelt questions the Pontiff asked the pastors of the church in the interview I gave him was:

“How are we treating God’s people?” Even the verb, *treating*, is to be read perhaps in the sense of *care* in the context of a *field hospital*. And *treatment* takes time, for it is realized over time and is open to the future of a healing process. Treatment is not miraculous, instantaneous: it needs a special time. Mercy also requires time. It requires a tension toward the future, without which it is meaningless. There is a process of progressive improvement that must remain open. Every rigid obstacle, every hindrance that precludes a path of improvement is an offense against God’s mercy. Then the ministers of the church must take charge of people, accompanying them like the Good Samaritan who washes, cleans, and lifts up his neighbor. This is pure gospel—an exercise in healing sores and wounds. But I believe that the medical gaze is not reserved exclusively for pastors but must also be embodied by each of us. In this sense the book *God’s Field Hospital* is an important tool.

To take the path that Michael Hansen proposes is to fulfill what Francis asked for in his Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, *Misericordiae vultus*: “Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help! May we reach out to them and support them so they can feel the warmth of our presence, our friendship, and our fraternity!” (no. 15).

This book helps open our eyes to make us willing to open our hands. Like any true spiritual exercise, it is not to be *read* but to be *done*: it proposes exercises, not theoretical meditations. It will not simply nourish our minds, but our very ability to see ourselves and the world. And perhaps it will help those who take the proposed path of working to make our world a better place.

# Introduction

I see clearly that the thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal the wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful, with closeness and, proximity.

I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously wounded person if he has high cholesterol and high sugar! One must treat his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds... and you must start from the ground up.

—Pope Francis,  
“Interview with Antonio Spadaro, SJ,”  
*America*, 2013

Pope Francis imagines the church as a frontline field hospital, a church that is quickly responsive to urgent needs, adaptable to the situation, modular, mobile, safe, and a temporary configuration for greater freedom in mission. It is always near the people where they suffer and are wounded. What might such a flexible church have to offer? What kind of healing is needed on the battlefield of people’s lives today? This book responds to these questions with specific exercises based on the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* for healing on the frontiers or margins of our life.

This book is not *about* a field hospital. It does not teach or explain; it *is* a field hospital. It offers real treatment by the

greatest physician of all, the healing Spirit of God, for those hurt, wounded, or ill, for those who find themselves in the dark, nursing a cold heart, and holding on to a failing life.

## Imagining God’s Field Hospital

“The church as a field hospital” is a metaphor, a way of speaking that correlate two seemingly unrelated ideas to make the listener see them in a new way. In this case “church” and “field hospital.” A metaphor equates these two things directly, visually, and emotionally, as one and the same. It stretches you to imagine the church as a field hospital, as “God’s field hospital.”

The book presents a fully developed metaphor of a field hospital directory offering healing for specific wounds and illness, both physical and spiritual. In it, there are five broad levels of care: Emergency, Medical, Intensive, Specialist, and Recovery.

There are fifteen departments within them: admissions, emergency, and diagnosis begin at the entrance of the field hospital. Then there are the first responses of health, first aid, and mental health. Following this are the lifesaving modules for critical, surgical, and coronary care. Specialist care is offered in modules for respiratory, orthopedic, and pain management. Finally, there are the short-term wards for physical therapy, rehabilitation, and recovery.

Each department represents the different mobile units, or modules, of a field hospital, a spine and branch of tents linked together into pathways of healing.

Within each department, there are four spiritual exercises. Each individual exercise has a description and a list of symptoms. Each exercise is a means of care for body, mind, and spirit. They are for anyone affected by suffering, illness, or wounds, and it is better to use them in prayer than to explain them. While the structure of these exercises is

simple, their purpose is to go deeper and treat the wounds immediately.

Pope Francis explains that “a field hospital church is a place for urgent care...a church that goes forth toward those who are ‘wounded,’ who are in need of an attentive ear, understanding, forgiveness, and love.”<sup>1</sup>

## Choosing a Healing Exercise

Choice or desire in Ignatian prayer is paramount, and in a field hospital one needs a specific treatment for a specific wound or illness. Each diagnosis, each healing path, is unique to each person. So, how does one choose the right healing exercise?

Retreat books offer linear programs of prayer. They often have themes with a start and an end, various ways to pray, and reflections by the author. A field hospital of spiritual exercises is completely different. This book is neither linear nor bound by a beginning and an end. The author is invisible. *God’s Field Hospital* is more like a piano or a kitchen, to use two metaphors.

### THE PIANO AND THE SONG

A piano keyboard has black and white keys, and each are the same in shape and function respectively. *God’s Field Hospital* has sixty exercises that are virtually the same in structure, shape, and function. With a piano keyboard, you have an almost infinite number of ways to play and create wonderful music.

In *God’s Field Hospital* the variety of exercises is also great. The healing in purpose and effect can be wonderful as well, but healing can only begin by praying the best exercise. So, the one who needs the healing must choose the exercise

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1. Pope Francis, *The Name of God Is Mercy: A Conversation with Andrea Torrielli* (New York: Doubleday, 2017), 50.

that meets her or his specific need for healing and will vary for each person. There is no linear program; your healing is your song.

## THE KITCHEN AND THE FEAST

Consider the kitchen and all the ingredients and spices in the pantry and fridge. These are the same for every meal, the spices are the same collection of spices, and the protein and vegetables are the same, but how one uses spices, in what proportion and preparation, and how the meat, fish, or vegetables are prepared, provide a great variety of meals. In *God's Field Hospital*, the one in need of healing tastes and chooses exercises respective of their need. Each hunger is different, each want is unique, and each healing meal will be special. Your healing is your feast.

## Choice and Desire

How do I choose the best exercise for my healing? There are six good ways to find the best exercise. Each field hospital department is introduced by the titles, descriptions, and symptoms of its four exercises. Furthermore, each exercise has a unique desire, scripture passage, and Spirit of God. All these can be helpful. Choose the one that you feel attracted to in any of the departments. The index at the back of the book contains a full list of symptoms. Your healing is your heart's desire.

What if someone wants to pray several exercises for an extended treatment of a wound or illness? There are two possibilities, the first is to choose the best exercise and then pray the other three exercises in the same department. They are linked deliberately. The second is to choose the two, three, or as many exercises as you like, for a healing pathway.

Please note that there is no single perfect choice, so you cannot really go wrong. Relax and try the one that appears



best. If it does not meet your need, choose another. The Spirit will help you.

## Flowing with a Healing Exercise

The *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* are highly structured, guided, and focused. They are *structured* using a set of regular steps, *guided* by the desire of the exercise, and *focused* on the relationship between God and the receiver, the one praying the exercise.<sup>2</sup>

The structure of the exercises is like a trellis for a climbing plant. It supports the plant as it grows, but it does not affect the direction, the speed of growth, or the fruit of that plant.

There are two types of exercises in *God's Field Hospital*. Forty-four exercises are for direct healing, and there are sixteen exercises for healing discernment that are marked with an asterisk in the table of contents. The direct healing exercises focus on a particular illness, wound, or need. The exercises for healing discernment focus on life-giving choices that affect the whole person—the healing direction to move in, usually with greater freedom.

An essential dynamic of the discernment exercises for healing is the understanding and naming of a *contrary* experience. A contrary experience has three features that make it valuable. First, each contrary experience reveals much about the original experience, for example, love and rejection. Second, contrary experiences are not just opposites, they move in contrary directions, for example, toward greater love or deeper rejection. Third, contrary experiences are very personal, rooted in my memories and life journey, for example, my experience of being loved or rejected. Naming a contrary

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2. The original five-step structure of the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises* are Preparation, Introductory Prayer, Desire, Prayer, and Conversation.

experience reveals the best way forward in my life at any particular time when healing is needed.

In sum, one may move away from God, into darkness and deeper alienation from the Healer, or one may move toward God, into greater intimacy and peace in the Healer.

The core moment of the direct healing exercise is “breathing” in the Spirit. The core moment for the exercises for healing discernment is “resting” in the Spirit. Breathing and resting are simple, deep, healing ways to join with the Spirit of God. Each way of praying has its own dynamic and flow.

## Receiving a Healing Exercise

In each of the field hospital exercises, the receiver is invited to meet God directly. This way of meeting God through a structured spiritual exercise was developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola more than five hundred years ago. This form of prayer has helped many people during times of feast and famine, peace and plague, inside and outside the church. It is always offered freely, humbly, without coercion.

These *spiritual exercises* always draw upon the life experience of the receiver. Without judgment, they honor a person’s entire life journey. No one else can intrude, not the giver of an exercise, an expert, a holier person, or anyone else. The exercise simply holds God and the receiver; what happens is up to them both and is a key element of Ignatian spirituality.

Ignatian spirituality includes prayer forms that use the imagination, memory, image, and symbol. The exercises within this book also do that. Another Ignatian element is the use of the senses and body, like holding, touching, breathing, and feeling. The last Ignatian element is prayer or contemplation that leads to action, love, or gratitude expressed in deed. Each exercise ends by reaching out to others.

There are some surprising advantages to this form of prayer. First, the receiver needs no preparation, just the generosity to pray the exercise. There is no training, level of faith, or knowledge of church necessary. These exercises are for everyone of goodwill.

To really know how to choose, flow with, and receive an exercise, go, and pray, receive the healing first. Then the above descriptions will be well revealed in your own prayer experience.

## Ministry and Mission

The ministers of the Gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people's night, into the darkness, but without getting lost.

—Pope Francis,  
“Interview with Antonio Spadaro, SJ,”  
*America*, 2013

Pope Francis, here, is describing health workers in God's field hospital. He is also naming the healing that provides warmth, support, and conversation to someone living in the dark. This intimate, caring presence almost defines the mission of the church. Pope Francis exclaims:

So many people need their wounds healed! This is the mission of the Church: to heal the wounds of the heart, to open doors, to free people, to say that God is good, God forgives all, God is the Father, God is affectionate, God always waits for us. (Homily at Mass in Santa Marta, February 5, 2015)