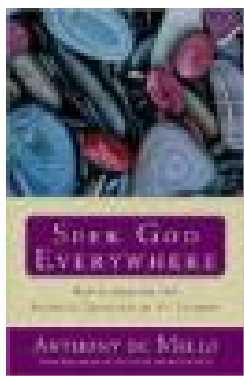


## If you want to know God, prepare for an ordeal

John Dear | Oct. 27, 2009 On the Road to Peace

### Anthony de Mello's Jesuit spirituality

This week has taken me across the world. I was in Santa Fe, N.M., Saturday at the Pax Christi conference featuring Franciscan peacemaker Fr. Louie Vitale. Then in New York City on Sunday to preside at Mass and speak at the celebration for my old friend, Dr. Paul Farmer, along with Bill Clinton, Jim Yong Kim, president of Dartmouth, and Bill and Melinda Gates. Then in Hawaii to speak in Kona on the big island before embarking on speaking tours of New Zealand and Australia. It's a bit much, but a great blessing to meet people everywhere I go who care passionately about the world's poor, about the possibilities of peace and nonviolence, and about the God of love and peace.



My companion along the way has been a newly discovered manuscript by the late Jesuit

spiritual writer, Anthony de Mello. A retreat leader from India, he gained international prominence with his best-selling books on the spiritual life, such as *Awareness* and *Song of the Bird*. I consider his book, *Sadhana*, the best book ever written on prayer. (Get it and read it.) In 1987, he died suddenly at Fordham, just before a scheduled speaking engagement.

Early next year, Doubleday will publish *Seek God Everywhere*, de Mello's reflections and directions for the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. They sent me an early copy and I can't put it down. It's an instant classic, certainly the best book ever written on Jesuit spirituality and the Spiritual Exercises. It helps re-center my own spiritual journey in the Jesuit way of passion and zeal for Jesus, in a deep desire to do only God's will.

I hesitate to write about it because the Spiritual Exercises are so unique in Christian history, and relatively few people have ever made them. They are an intensive, strict, 30 day silent retreat, written by St. Ignatius after his nine month experience living in a cave, which he tweaked and refined over a period of decades until his death. Every Jesuit makes the retreat when they enter the novitiate, and then again about 15 to 20 years later. Although I love Franciscan, Benedictine, Cistercian, Carmelite, Jewish, and Buddhist spiritualities, I myself am forever a student of Ignatian spirituality because of the profound experience I had making the Exercises. I don't suggest that people go and make the 30 day retreat, but I do recommend eight day retreats at Jesuit retreat centers to get the flavor of this kind of spirituality.

Basically, as Anthony de Mello explains in this extraordinary book, the Exercises take a person deep into an

experience of God, based on intensive meditations on the life of Jesus and St. Ignatius' rules and guidelines. It's full immersion, like a deep sea diving experience, like going off on a submarine exploration under the Antarctic for a month, like climbing the Himalayas. You are never the same afterwards. You come back a different person.

Actually, that doesn't explain it at all. It's an experience of God, theoretically a total transformation which should lead the retreatant to give his or her life entirely for God through the service of humanity according to the life of Jesus. The fact that you can't speak to anyone, receive mail, talk on the phone, watch TV, peruse the paper, or read a book is just the beginning. Each day, you make five one-hour prayer periods, as well as attend liturgy, reflect on your prayer, and meet with your spiritual director. Because of Ignatius' astute meditations, you are quickly brought to a deeper understanding of your self, your God, and the call and way of Jesus.

The Exercises are broken down into four sections, which St. Ignatius calls "weeks." As de Mello explains, the original book simply cannot be read. It's like a cook book; it makes no sense whatsoever. It has to be experienced. In fact, the *Spiritual Exercises* is really a handbook for the spiritual director, not for the retreatant. The overall goal is to transform the person completely into a passionate servant of God and apostle for Jesus.

Reading de Mello's great manuscript took me back to my own deep experience of God in the Exercises, when I was a Jesuit novice in 1983, and later as a Jesuit tertian in 1997. The Exercises, and the challenge to live this experience for the rest of one's life, put the problems of life and the world in perspective -- from the hustle and bustle of daily life to the global crises of war, poverty and nuclear weapons to the failures and sins of church and state -- all within the long haul view of God, our journey to God and the call to live totally for God. Indeed, that's the goal of the Exercises, the goal of life itself and all we do for peace and justice: God. Period.

For those who have made the Exercises or are interested in Jesuit Spirituality or just interested in deeper avenues to God, Anthony de Mello's book will be a revelation, certainly a great affirmation. He takes the reader through St. Ignatius' four weeks, and offers his reflections and comments along the way. But he is such a genius; his simple observations seem so obvious that reading his book makes you feel like a spiritual novice being whacked on the head with a bamboo stick by your Zen master. De Mello is one of the great spiritual masters of our time, and his insights are so simple, so clear, so challenging, that they snap you out of your daydream life and wake you up to the real world, that is, life with God. This is his masterpiece.

*Seek God Everywhere* outlines the basics of Ignatian spirituality with a modern sensibility and Indian twist. While the point is "a crash program for centering our hearts on God," "moving the center of gravity of our hearts onto Christ," enjoying the consolation, peace and quiet of life in Christ, de Mello asserts that prayer is hard work.

Who says that these days? The retreat is work, and daily prayer is work, he insists. We must keep to our schedule, show up, and devote ourselves to God. I am reminded of the book of Wisdom: "If you want to know God, prepare yourself for an ordeal."

He walks us through the Exercises, discussing the Principle and Foundation (the life mission to love and serve God), God's unconditional love of us, the need to face our sins and selfish rejection of God, and then the call to follow Jesus, to understand his way versus the way of the world, and to journey with him to his crucifixion and resurrection, so that in the end, we identify ourselves completely with Jesus, even losing ourselves in him as St. Paul will urge.

De Mello explains how Ignatius wants us to love and serve God the way God wants us to, not the way we want to, a subtle -- and painful -- difference. "If prayer is really what it should be, it is a painful experience," de Mello writes at one point, "because we are reporting for orders. That is the way a person encounters God, the God of the Bible."

His reflections on the conclusion of the retreat are brilliant -- how we are to be people of resurrection, contemplatives in action, people of universal love, selfless service, who pour out our lives for suffering humanity. He urges us to show more evidence of "the quality of resurrection life," and points to Mahatma Gandhi as our Christian model. "He was always cheerful, peaceful, even humorous and very serene, and he led a crucified existence." I have always secretly thought this, but never said it publicly: Gandhi lived Jesuit spirituality better than anyone. Indeed, I think the Jesuits were meant to be an army of Gandhian satyagrahis. (Alas, it has not turned out that way!)

Many activists I know study Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh, and rightly so, for their wisdom. But I have always thought that their holy writings were intended first of all for monks and monastic communities, and few of us are monks. Ignatian spirituality, on the other hand, right from the beginning, was intended for activists -- for people pushed into the world to disarm and transform the world as God's servants of love, peace and justice.

I wish more peace and justice activists would study and experiment with Ignatian spirituality because I think it will give them a spiritual framework better suited for their life work. Though I barely understand it, it still makes the most sense for me. Anthony de Mello's new book will help anyone engaged in the work of peace and justice to center their hearts in God, root their work in radical discipleship to Jesus, and discover a new freedom that is out of this world. I highly recommend it.

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This week, John is speaking throughout New Zealand, and next week, he will lead a retreat, "The School of Prophets," in Adelaide, Australia. Next month, his new book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*, will be published by Orbis Books. His autobiography, *A Persistent Peace*, and recent collection of these NCR columns, *Put Down the Sword*, are available from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*. For further information, or to schedule a speaking engagement in your church or school, see: [www.johndear.org](http://www.johndear.org).

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