I’ve recently had the opportunity of refamiliarizing myself with the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius, as Jesuits do every year when they make their annual retreat. The *Spiritual Exercises* is one of the oddest “books that changed the world” that you could possibly imagine. I know that when someone unfamiliar with the Exercises asks if they should read it, I am often reluctant to recommend that they do so. Partly this is because the writing will be so disappointing. St. Ignatius was not a great prose stylist, although occasionally he could rise to rhetorical effect, almost in spite of himself. One of my favorite examples of this is from the Second Contemplation on the Nativity: “This will be to see and consider what they are doing [that is, Mary and Joseph], for example, making the journey and laboring that our Lord might be born in extreme poverty, and that after many labors, after hunger, thirst, heat and cold, after insults and outrages, He might die on the cross, and all this for me. Then I will reflect and draw some spiritual fruit from what I have seen.” Wow! But passages like this are exceptional in the *Spiritual Exercises* for their rarity.

It is not just Ignatius’ infelicitous style that makes the *Spiritual Exercises* inaccessible to the casual reader. It is also that the Exercises were not meant to be read as a piece of literature. They are a manual for the retreat director who is giving the Exercises, and presumably were not
meant for the person who was making the Exercises, to say nothing of the casual reader. That is why reading the Exercises can sometimes be like reading a cookbook on an instruction manual: “Do this, this and this, and if that doesn’t work, try this. And if none of that works first time around, then try this!” Then there are the many places where St. Ignatius will say, “This will be the same as in the preceding contemplation and identical in form with it, or “the same should be observed with regard to each of the points given below.” Not a wasted word! Really, the only people who should be reading the Exercises are directors and those who have made the Exercises enough times that they can self-direct.

The next thing that strikes anyone who experiences the Exercises is the psychological insight and acumen of St. Ignatius. The Exercises are, of course, based on a Christian anthropology, and find their deepest meaning in relation to a Christian view of the world, and we will return to the Christology of the Exercises in a moment. But I have known too many people who have made a version of the Exercises without necessarily being Christian believers and who have found them an incredibly powerful experience. This, of course, is because the Exercises focus our attention on matters like our purpose in life, on what within ourselves prevents us from realizing that purpose, and on the resources we have to turn our lives around. And these are matters that are accessible to anyone who is willing to engage in self-reflection and consider changing or reforming their lives.

The main purpose of the Exercises, however, is to focus our attention on the person of Christ and what He has done for us. Even when St. Ignatius asks us to contemplate our own sinfulness, it is before Christ
on the cross, “asking how it is that though He is the Creator, He has stooped to become man, and to pass from eternal life to death here in time, that thus he might die for our sins. . . . As I behold Christ in this plight, nailed to the cross, I shall ponder upon what presents itself to my mind.” But this dialogue with Christ on the cross, which one might imagine to be frightening and intimidating, “is made,” St. Ignatius says, “by speaking exactly as one friend speaks to another or as a servant speaks to his master, now asking him for a favor, now blaming himself for some misdeed, now making known his affairs to him, and seeking his advice in them.” Quite an extraordinary vision of what the encounter is between the guilty sinner and his or her savior: of intimacy, really, in the act of salvation, where we know and are known by, and experience the love of the one who saves us.

St. Ignatius ends the Exercises with the Contemplation to Attain Love of God. In this exercise we are asked above all to understand how deeply we have been blessed, and in so many ways, beyond all deserving, but personally and, again, intimately, by God’s encounter with us. It is this realization of God’s personal love for us that finally gives us the ability to be able to make our own offering of ourselves to God with freedom and with joy, and it is this realization of the personal love of God for each person as an individual that the Exercises aims above all at achieving.