

*Spiritual Consolations: An Ignatian Guide for the Greater Discernment of Spirits*, by Timothy M. Gallagher, O.M.V. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2007. ISBN-13: 9780824524296, 192 pp., pb \$16.95.

This is a book about making choices.

It is particularly about making choices when a person is deeply and powerfully drawn to some course of action, and yet has doubts about it. How much credit should be given to the inner sense of strong attraction? How much to objective considerations telling in the opposite direction? This type of problem may arise over quite minor, everyday choices. The book is more concerned with life choices which carry long-term consequences.

The author is a Jesuit priest, a lecturer and retreat leader in much demand around the world. He is well-versed in the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola, and brings to bear in his writing both his scholarly thinking and his practical experiences as a spiritual counsellor. His style is that of a teacher who is anxious to press home the salient points of his lesson: He is not afraid to repeat himself frequently if he thinks this clarifies his message.

The author's main aim is to offer guidance, based on the Exercises of St Ignatius, to anyone facing difficult decisions, and perhaps even more to help those who are seeking to help others who may be confused as to what choice to make. He probably has in his sights the clergy, social workers and other professionals, and the friends of those in difficulties.

The best part of the book to my mind lies in the illustrations from real life which the author gives. These demonstrate in detail how the Ignatian "Rules for the Greater Discernment of Spirits" (Loyola's term for making right choices when under stress) can be usefully applied as much today as in past. Eight people are selected to provide the examples: five of them, named as Patricia, Charles, Barbara, David and Ruth, are from the present, three of them from the past, Francis of Assisi, Ignatius Loyola and Jean Vianney, the Curé d'Ars.

The word "Consolation" as used in the book denotes a warmth of the heart arising from faith, a sense of spiritual joy and of closeness to God, and intense happiness in the thought of doing some piece of work. I think it is worth noticing, though this is not mentioned in the book, that John Wesley used similar language in his Journal for Wednesday 24 May 1738, recording the turning-point in his life:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans.

About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed, I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation.

The question is, how trustworthy is such an experience of warmth?

The answer of the book to the question of trustworthiness might be summed up as: "Take care. Beware of subtle illusions. Subject the experience to rigorous tests. Examine what went with the experience, and how it left you. Do not take important, life-changing decisions until you have completed the tests." The tests which Ignatias Loyola formulated in his "Rules" arose from his acute psychological observation of the conflicting trains of thought which had distressed him at critical moments in his life. They are subtle and complex, and need to be carefully applied with plenty of flexibility.

The drama in the book—and I think it can justly be called drama—runs throughout, in the study of the conflict between good and evil, or the warring forces or movements in a person's mind. Tragic consequences can follow a bad or at least a mistaken choice made under the influence of negative impulses, or of high ideals and noble impulses when they are misinterpreted. Applying the Ignatian guide-lines in these circumstances becomes detective-work, spotting the clues unmasking the villains, so that disaster may be averted.

I can confidently recommend this book as an illuminating commentary on the Ignatian Rules. Anyone looking for a methodical approach to solving difficult personal problems which involve making vital decisions, could hardly do better than to try out the system proposed here. Further, everyone could emerge from reading this book with a sharpened discernment, a quickened awareness, of what may be going on in the everyday thought-process of the human mind, which can be like a battle-ground. The author wants us all to have a greater ability to discern between that which will prove in the end to be life-destroying, and that which will be life-enhancing. Therefore, as he says in his conclusion, the reading of this book is more a beginning than an end.

The book may do something more. It may lead readers on to pondering how these perplexities in the mind arise in the first place. What are these strange cross-currents in the human psyche, which are here variously called "the good spirits" and "the false spirits" or "the Enemy," "the good angels," and "the bad angels"? What do they signify? Are they in absolute opposition to each other? Or do they (like "Ying" and "yang") subserve in some mysterious way the creative purposes of God? They are beyond

doubt part of the human experience as reported universally; what do they imply ultimately, and is this territory for Implicit Religion to explore? I believe it is.

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