

## ***February Spiritual Book Summary***

### ***God's Voice Within: The Ignatian Way to Discover God's Will***

Mark E. Thibodeaux SJ, Loyola Press, 2010, 230 pp., \$14.95

By Dan Brent

Some decisions are major turning points in our lives. Whether to marry, whom to marry, what school to go to, what career to pursue, what job to take, where to live, whether to have children, whether to stay in a marriage. In addition, life is filled with lesser decisions. And to a great extent, “these seemingly small and insignificant daily choices define who you are as a person.” (p.3) In the 1960’s, it was decisions like that of Rosa Parks on the bus that created the Civil Rights Movement.

Assuming your faith tells you that God is regularly calling you, you still must “learn to recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd.” The book explains the remarkable system that St. Ignatius invented for making decisions sensitive to what God wants for our lives. In 1521, the future saint was a soldier and ladies man. He was wounded in battle and, during his convalescence, he had time to read and think. That time turned his priorities around and tuned him into God. He went on to found the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits.

Author Thibodeaux focuses just on the decision-making thoughts of Ignatius, his “discernment” regimen. It is based largely on becoming aware of two “spirits”. The “true” spirit pulls me toward God and makes me feel consolation, contentment. The “false” spirit pulls me away from God and makes me feel desolation, discontent.

The choices that the false spirit leads me to may make me happy for the moment, but they leave a residue of disquiet, disturbance, restlessness. “Unsettling confusion is indeed a common telltale sign of desolation.” (p.25) So are boredom and apathy and lethargy. The opposite of life, Thibodeaux points out, is not death; it is lethargy. Another symptom of the false spirit is secrecy. We shout good choices from the housetops. Awkward choices, those we are embarrassed about, get hidden even from our closest friends.

The fruit of the good spirit, consolation, is characterized by faith, hope, and love, by a sense of God’s closeness, by peace and tranquility, and by transparency.

Before the book moves on to outlining the steps for making a decision, it makes suggestions for dealing with both desolation and consolation.

In periods when we are feeling desolation, Ignatius suggests naming the desolation. “To name something is to have authority over it.” (p.63) He also cautions that changes and important decisions should be put off during periods of desolation because a person loses objectivity in those circumstances. A support system of friends and mentors and companions is helpful also. So is spiritual direction. Desolation can also be caused by

psychological or medical problems. And, whatever the cause, God – like a good sailor – “can use any wind to go in whatever direction he wishes.” (p.101)

On the other hand, periods of consolation provide opportunities to prepare for the periods of desolation that may eventually come. It’s a time when we can look back at the hard times and put a reason on why they came, identify the vulnerabilities we seem to have, and build positive helps like spiritual direction and journaling.

The main part of the book now outlines the steps that Ignatius suggests for making a decision. He cautions that serious decisions should only be made in times of consolation. Also, he explains that any decision should be grounded on what we might call our “mission statement”. We need to have thought through the big issues of who we are and what our relationship to God is to be. Ignatius wrote, “Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God.” But this also needs to take into account my specific life. If I am spouse, parent, caregiver, all of that factors in.

To this, Thibodeaux adds another note from Ignatius that we must bring to our decisions: an attitude of openness to God. Ignatius calls it “indifference”. But that has a negative sound in our culture. He means that we are willing to accept whatever God wants.

The decision process itself consists of four steps. The first is to “get quiet.” This simply means “pray”. He’s talking about a consistent habit of prayer, not just say-a-prayer. The Ignatian model for decision making is to fit into a life that includes regular prayer.

The second step is “gathering data”. Identify the options for a decision. And then identify some more options. Use your imagination. Include some options that look crazy at least at first. Then gather all the data you can on each one. Use Google. Talk to friends. Talk to people involved. Talk about it with God in your prayer.

The third step is to “dream the dreams”. Fanaticize about what the future might look like with each choice. For myself. For my family. How good might it be?

The fourth step is to “ponder the dreams”. The point here is to identify the contentment or desolation that I feel about each of the options. My own feelings are major indicators to me of God’s will for me in this decision. This was the point of all the preliminary material in the book on contentment and desolation. If there is an option that brings me great deep-down peace, that speaks loudly about what God wants. If, on the other hand, an option generated feelings of disquiet and discomfort, then God is likely sending a different message.

Sometimes, Thibodeaux concedes, no clear decision may emerge from this process. The fallback is to take the surviving options and deal with them just rationally. Make for each two lists – advantages and disadvantages. And let logic decide. And here are some other things that might help. Ask, “How might I counsel someone in a similar position?” Or do stream-of-consciousness journaling and then read it back to yourself.

The decision you make is tentative. Now delay implementation for a bit. Give it time, thought, distance. Prayerfully daydream your choice more realistically. Confirm it with an adviser. If confirmation doesn't come, you may need to begin again. But don't wait for certainty – that rarely comes.