

## September Book Summary

### **The Gift of Spiritual Intimacy: Following the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius**

Monty Williams, SJ, Novalis Press, 2009, \$24.95

“For St. Ignatius, the most important thing in a person’s life is to find God.” (p.295) “The path to intimacy starts when we allow God to enter our stories.” (p.13) “God defines us. We are unfinished business.” (p.19) “The first stage of intimacy carries us to the realization that even here we are loved, protected, and held in God’s love.” (p.23)

During the last few years, our Director of Formation at Transfiguration, Damian Zynda and a team of qualified and experienced spiritual directors have taken parishioners through the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius. They use an eight-month format that Ignatius suggested in “The Nineteenth Annotation” of his directions. (The basic format of the Exercises is the thirty-day retreat. Most people, of course, can’t make that kind of time commitment!)

This book amounts to a third option – a self-directed “whenever” retreat that consists of forty-nine meditations. It follows the “four weeks” format of the *Spiritual Exercises* and provides 9 to 19 meditations for each of the “weeks”.

The first week reflects on sin – in our personal lives and in the world. There is sin in our history (since the fallen angels and Adam), in our world, and in our personal life. That makes God’s love for us even more astonishing! “We become more and more aware of being held in God’s love, and we discover that God’s love holds us, even when we sin.” (p.35)

The second “week” invites us to look at Jesus as the proof of God’s love and the model for our lives. “We are invited to journey with Christ and to pray for an intimate knowledge of him.” (p.37) “The movement is from the world perceived in worldly terms to that same world perceived from the perspective of God.” (p.305) In prayer, the participant learns to see consolation and desolation as clues as to whether or not our decisions are moving us toward or away from God.

The third week takes the participant with Jesus through his passion and death. “It is our intimacy with the Father that allows us to be companions with Christ in this stage of his human journey through death.” (p.37) The meditations go from the last supper, through Pilate, the way of the cross, the crucifixion, and his death, to his burial. “It is only through death that resurrection can happen.” (p.311) “Think of what happens to you when you accompany a loved one who is dying. We experience numbness. We simply wait in mystery.” (p.312) “Death is revealed not as the end of life, but as a transition to that mystery beyond sin’s power.” (p.314)

The “fourth week” brings us to the resurrection. “We are not asked to experience joy because of what we have done, but rather to share Christ’s joy and glory in his return to

the Father.” (p.38) “Only the power of God controls what happens after death.” (p.316) Still this is very much about us. “*We* become signs of the continuing presence of the resurrected Christ on earth.” (p.318) “We experience the power of God moving through our brokenness to create Incarnation in our lived world.” (p.319) And “He leaves it up to each of us to discern what we can do.” (p.320)

There are 49 meditations. (A couple of them have subdivisions – the beatitudes section includes meditations on individual beatitudes.) Each of the meditations begins with a brief and relevant scripture text. That’s followed by a quote from the original text of Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises*. Then there is a short explicit proposal of the “Grace to be prayed for” in this meditation.

The largest portion of each meditation in the book consists of the author’s reflections on the topic – always in the spirit of Ignatius’s thoughts. That is followed by a series of questions to prompt reflections. (Examples: “Have you ever been offered a gift you could not pay back? How do you deal with gratitude?” p.211) Even the shortest of the meditations merits repetition and many are nearly impossible to thoughtfully plumb in a single session. Clearly this is not a book you can “read”! Nor can you finish it in 49 prayer periods.

So what to do with it? People who have done the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius will find this book a marvelous opportunity to revisit the experience in meditative prayer. The path will be familiar; the insights and feelings renewed.

For people who have not done the *Exercises* in a directed format, I am hesitant. A case can be made that the forty-nine meditations in the book are each clear and profound and accessible to any sincere Christian. God will do with them what he wants for the conscientious participant! But . . . Ignatius envisioned the *Exercises* as “directed” with the participant having access to someone who can motivate, respond to problems, preserve balance, and see that the flow is appreciated. So a “Spiritual-Exercises-for-Dummies” type book may not be the best idea.