

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY FOR SEEKERS: REFLECTIONS ON THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES OF IGNATIUS LOYOLA. By Roger Haight. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012. Pp. xxviii + 292. \$25.

This is the book Haight was writing when the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) barred him from writing on theology, although he was permitted to continue working on this book. I for one am grateful that H. completed this work and published it. It is simply the best study I have read on the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola.

As with any book, readers will react differently depending on many factors of personal background and taste. As a historical theologian and Jesuit, who has made the Spiritual Exercises annually for many years, I find the work exceptionally evocative. Although written expressly for “seekers”—the book comes out of H.’s experience of giving the Exercises “to thirty-five students [at Union Theological Seminary] over a period of eight weeks in the spring of 2007”—who might be of any faith background or none; the sine qua non is that the exercitant be open to transcendent reality.

H. points out that his venture goes back to Ignatius, who tailored the Exercises to the exercitant’s background, which might not be Christian. The result of H.’s adapting the Exercises to a remarkably diverse group of exercitants is an exceptionally valuable resource, a vade mecum, for those who are either making the Exercises or directing them. If the exercitants are devout Christians, much can be presumed. If they are nonbelievers or alienated Christians, their experience must be incorporated into their retreat: the director must adapt the Exercises by recommending for consideration biblical passages that can invite exercitants to enter into them with, and by reason of, their current situations. H. offers numerous examples of such passages along with learned exegesis of these passages and hints on how they can “speak” to retreatants in whatever faith circumstances they find themselves. The sole requirement is that retreatants be open to meditation experiences “in which transcendent meaning arises” (xxiv).

Alive to the Vatican restrictions on him, H. is careful to note that his book “is a work of spirituality and not theology” (xxiv). He also crucially notes that his method is based on that of Jesus: “[His] ministry intentionally challenged the theological suppositions of his audience and with abrupt images confronted the imaginations of his hearers with new possibilities. The Exercises raise these stories of Jesus up against the vacuum left by theological language that no longer seems credible and the embarrassing public postures of the churches. In this way they can revitalize spirituality and provide a springboard for renewal” (xxiv). As such, H.’s work stands as a reliable guide for all who find themselves longing for meaning beyond what they have so far found in their lives.

The work is organized into two parts. The first, “Ignatius and the Spiritual Exercises,” introduces readers to Ignatius’s life and the “logic” of the Exercises. Thus we see the Exercises, in H.’s astute telling, rooted in history, arising out of Ignatius’s life-long pilgrimage within late medieval Western Christian tradition and culture. H. emphasizes the developmental coherence of the Exercises from the “First Week” through the “Fourth Week” and the final Contemplation to Attain Love, arguing compellingly that the Exercises follow a trajectory that the skilled director will modulate to the exercitant’s biography to bring him or her to a growthful outcome. Even those who are well saturated in the Ignatian tradition will likely find, as I did, H.’s account of the “logic” of the Exercises wonderfully insightful, clarifying, and illuminating.

All this comes from one whose own life finds parallels and resonances with Ignatius and the divine-human subject of the Exercises. Autobiographical resonances in the text are unmistakable. The whole springs from the deep well of mature theological and spiritual perspective of one steeped in the theological and Ignatian tradition of the Exercises, and whose own life experiences encompass personal trials that lend his words the ring of truth and authenticity: H. knows whereof he writes. Thus his text, while being theologically precise and careful, virtually “sings” pray-ers into fruitful realms of contemplation; it “opens their minds to a reality that utterly transcends the visual depictions” of the Christian story (251).

Part 2, “Reflections to Accompany the Spiritual Exercises,” brilliantly translates Ignatius’s late medieval optic into that of 21st-century seekers, without hazing over the ethos of the original. For example, H. calls his exposition of Week One, when the exercitant seeks light on the depths of his or her relationship with God and all God’s creatures, “Anthropology.” Which, of course, it is, but who ever thought of the First Week this way? In moves such as this—and there are many—H.’s well-earned reputation as a master teacher shines. His exposition, beginning to end, coherently bears out how apposite “master teacher” is.

As alluded to above, H.’s methodological model is the Gospels. Their complex of authors exercised inspired imagination—a major focus of H.’s commentary—to create, as historical circumstances would have it, four narratives of the life of Jesus. In so doing the authors provided a method for later Christians and others to follow Ignatius into these narratives with imagination and therein discover how and what they mean for us today. Retreatants can therefore discover for themselves how Paul could meaningfully tell Christians to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 13:14) and “have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5).