

Imagination, Discernment and Spiritual Direction

Rob Marsh SJ



**Deep Reading Guide
for Individuals or Groups**

IN THIS LEAFLET you will find all the information you need to start a deep reading group based around the book *Imagination, Discernment and Spiritual Direction* by Rob Marsh SJ. You can also use it for deep reading on your own. The fascinating insights the book contains will help you understand how to discern and how to accompany others in their prayer. It will also lead you to a better understanding of how Ignatian spirituality fits into the modern world.

How to Organize a Reading Group

You may be able to find members for your group in your local community, faith group or place of work. Other contacts could be made through Ignatian Networks or local retreat centres. The group might decide to meet online if it is easier. Fix a date, a time and a place at which you will all be able to meet for eleven consecutive weeks. Choose a group leader who will guide the meeting and make any practical arrangements. Make sure each member of the group has a copy of the book and this guide. A PDF version of the guide can be downloaded from www.theway.org.uk/imagination. Many reading groups find that if practical arrangements are made in an organized way at the beginning then things will run smoothly for the rest of the meetings.

Before the Meeting

Each participant reads the next chapter in the book and uses the guided reflections to deepen his or her understanding of the insights it contains. It is one thing to have a theoretical grasp of the material, but much more important to be able to understand it in terms of your personal and communal experience. The guided reflections are structured to orientate your understanding it and let it deepen. The first section provides a brief framework for understanding a key idea. The second section contains an exploration to relate it to your personal experience. The third section provides exercises to help you to think the idea through. It may be that the guided reflections are not useful to you, in which case you are free to leave them to one side. The main thing is to be on the same page as everyone else and to have tried to understand the chapter before the session.

At the Meeting

The group leader initiates the discussion and makes sure all participants have what they need. It is important to be attentive to what is happening in each other's lives. Participants are invited to begin each session by relaxing themselves. You may wish to play some quiet music, sit in silence or find another way to feel at ease.

1. Meditation

Then the group is invited to engage with the following meditation, which is the keystone of the whole book and is also the first step of the first session:

- Consider how God is looking at you right now.
- How do you find yourself moved to respond?
- Does God want to respond to your response?

After two or three minutes of silence the group leader announces the first round of sharing. Depending on the group the members might also be invited to share what they have experienced in the moment of prayer. The silence may naturally lengthen and deepen over the course of the reading group.

2. First Round of Sharing

In this round participants are invited to share whatever they want. This could be based on the questions for each chapter, or it could be something completely different. If someone wishes to remain in silence then there is no problem. The participants are invited to share only what they feel comfortable with. At this stage there is no need to respond to what other people have said. When the group leader notices that all have said what they want to say, he or she introduces the second round.

3. Second Round of Sharing

In this round participants are invited to clarify anything they have said and to say what they heard in the sharing of others. It is not the opportunity to discuss or disagree with what has been said, merely to make a response.

4. Conclusion

At the end of the meeting, which might last for up to an hour, the leader concludes with a prayer or blessing and makes sure all participants have what they need to go to where they are going next. It could be that the leader invites each person to say a single word that he or she wants to take away from the meeting.

Deep Reading Guide for Each Chapter

CHAPTER ONE

Looking at God Looking at You: Ignatius' Third Addition

Framework

A key insight of this chapter is that God not an abstract idea but responds to us as a person does while our culture minimises this 'personhood' of God. When we become attentive to God's response to us in prayer, God gradually enters into our awareness of reality so that we can find God in all things.

Exploration

Take a moment to follow Ignatius' advice:

- Consider how God is looking at you.
- How does God respond?

Exercise

1. Does Rob's argument that we are 'mind-blind' to God reflect your own experience of prayer?
2. What are the obstacles in our culture to recognising God's personhood?
3. Recall a moment when God responded unexpectedly in your prayer. What did that moment reveal about God? What did it reveal about you?
4. What is Rob's proposal for discovering that God is a person like us?

CHAPTER TWO

Sloth

Framework

St Ignatius realised that it was *through* his desires that God was leading him, not in spite of them. The misguided desires of the character Lester in the film *American Beauty* eventually lead him from sloth towards a finer desire for beauty. God can make use of even of our most misdirected desires to lead us.

Exploration

- How could caring about your own appearance one day lead you to appreciate more deeply the beauty of others?
- Think of another example of how an everyday desire could lead to a deeper good.

Exercise

1. Rob defines sloth in the following way: ‘Acedia (sloth) is a very restless kind of indolence, a desire to be anywhere but here, doing anything but the one thing given to do.’ What do you find useful in this definition?
2. Recall when you last overcame a moment of sloth, either at home or at work. What can your own moments of sloth teach you about your deeper desires?
3. When have you been surprised by a moment of beauty and stayed long enough to respond to it? What was that like?
4. What strategies might you use in order to focus on whatever it is that you have been given to do right now?

CHAPTER THREE

Receiving and Rejecting: On Finding a Way in Spiritual Direction

Framework

In active listening we are supposed to discern which threads of experience to follow up in a spiritual conversation. The word ‘movement’ describes a spiritual motion towards God and ‘counter-movement’ describes a spiritual motion away from God. When we look closer we begin to see that there are eddies in the current that betray the presence of a movement in the other direction. Rob uses the maxim: ‘Stay with the movement and avoid the counter-movement’ while encouraging us to pay attention not just to the ‘coarse scale’ but also the ‘fine scale’ movements.

Exploration

- Think back to a moment when someone was listening to you.
- How did you know if he or she was listening passively or actively? How did he or she follow the thread of the conversation? What difference did it make?

Exercise

1. Explain what you find useful in the maxim ‘stay with the movement and avoid the counter-movement’?
2. Under what circumstances might it be worthwhile exploring the counter-movement?
3. Can you think of a moment in your life when an apparent set back turned out to be a step forward?
4. What is the difference between ‘coarse scale’ and ‘fine scale’ view of spiritual movements?

CHAPTER FOUR

Discernment: The Good, the Bad ... the Ignatian

Framework

Ignatius believed that each moment of human experience was full of spiritual movements, including thoughts, feelings, desires and perceptions, that occurred under the influence of the good and bad spirits. Discernment involves welcoming those movements in which God is to be found at work and rejecting the others. At the start of the essay Rob describes a microsecond of his day, but by the end he is aware that there is someone present in that and every moment of awareness, and that that ‘someone’ is Jesus.

Exploration

- Read the beginning of the essay in which Rob describes a ‘microsecond’ of his day.
- Write about a microsecond of your own day, trying to capture what you perceive in a single moment.

Exercise

1. Ignatius saw human experience as ‘saturated with a succession of dynamic psychological events, one after the other as in my microsecond above—what he called the motions of the soul.’ What are the obstacles to perceiving these motions in our daily lives?
2. How does the image of hospitality help you to understand the difference between ‘receiving’ the good and ‘rejecting’ the bad?
3. The general rule of thumb is that it is better to engage with the good spirit than to oppose the bad spirit. How does this help you to understand your everyday responses to God?

4. There are three things that help to invite the good spirit into your experience: gratitude, imaginal presence (for example, considering how God is looking at you) and conversation with God. Can you think of any other means of welcoming the good spirit?

CHAPTER FIVE

Discernment of Spirits: A Cosmological View

Framework

Ignatius claimed that God can and should influence the choices we make in our practical projects. He developed a profoundly religious world-view by rejecting the division between nature and culture according to which discernment implies a kind of religious knowledge. Some spiritual directors treat this knowledge pragmatically, but there is an invitation to discover the underlying spiritual reality it implies. The role of angels in the past was to explain the nature of this reality as polarized, beautiful, active, mediational, and relational. By not dividing the world into ‘nature’ and ‘spirit’ these aspects of reality represent a threshold between the human being and God, discernment is a gift to the world.

Exploration

- Think back to an important discernment in your life.
- How does thinking about it as a kind of knowledge help you to understand it?

Exercise

1. Where do you perceive a narrowing gap between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ in our world? Where do you see it increasing?
2. Read through the different approaches to the existence of the good and bad spirits: (i) pragmatic agnosticism; (ii) cosmological realism; (iii) theological immediacy; and (iv) anthropological reductionism. Do you agree with Rob’s analysis? Which of these views is most familiar to you?

3. 'Discernment is knowledge through imagination, through relationship, through encounter: it is what Ignatius called "felt knowledge".' How does your own experience of discernment reflect this description?

4. What is your own personal understanding of angels? How do your own beliefs match up with those described in the essay?

CHAPTER SIX

The Devil in the Desert

Framework

This essay is styled after C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*, in which a senior devil writes to a junior devil about how to tempt humanity. In Rob's updated version for the age of e-mail, Screwtape gives his 'nephew' advice on how to tempt someone away from the faithful observance of Lent. He shows that thinking of Lent as a desert can lead to spiritual pride. Against our temptation to wallow in the dryness, silence and darkness lies the possibility of encountering the true consolation of Lent that leads us to the joy of Easter.

Exploration

- Imagine the desert where Jesus went to pray.
- Why do you think that Jesus was tempted in a desert?

Exercise

1. "The genius is that we now have them believing that the more they pray the harder and more unpleasant it should get." What is your own experience of prayer as it has gone deeper?
2. How can you counterbalance the tendency towards spiritual pride during Lent?
3. If the consolation of Lent is not dryness and gloom, then what could it be?
4. Looking back on your life, what has it meant for you to treat Lent seriously?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Imagining Ignatian Spiritual Direction

Framework

The structure of prayer in the Spiritual Exercises hints at a model for spiritual direction because it is embedded in mutual response just like a conversation. Ignatius demonstrates a focus on a transformative encounter with the living God and a preference for the action of the good over the bad spirit. When understood in this way, spiritual conversation becomes an act of discernment that allows attention to fall fully upon an encounter with the living God.

Exploration

- Recall an experience of your own prayer.
- Go through that experience in your mind following the modes of interest suggested by the structure of Ignatian prayer:

Structure in the Spiritual Exercises	Spiritual Director's Questions
The History	What's been happening? What's been going on?
Composition of Place	What more do you notice? See, smell, hear, feel? What are you doing? How is God looking at me? How is God looking at you? What is your God like? Is God there?
The Grace	What do you want? What do you find yourself desiring?
Colloquy	Have you talked about it with Jesus/God? How does God respond?

Exercise

1. What exactly does Rob mean by the different 'modes of interest' in spiritual direction?
2. Read through the example case study and identify the different modes of interest in the conversation.
3. 'Rather than being an irritation, the structured hour of prayer in the Spiritual Exercises turns out to be the place where two carefully constructed dynamics intersect: the intense focus on imaginal encounter with God and the ongoing quest to learn and apply a discerning preference for the good spirit over the bad.' How does this act of discernment drive forward the dynamic of the Exercises?
4. What role does the director play in structuring a session of spiritual direction? Why does Ignatius think it is important to let the 'Creator to deal immediately with the creature'?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Faithful Imagination

Framework

Artists, scientists and those making the Spiritual Exercises share the endeavour to be faithful to their imaginations. Just as God created human beings by creating an image of Godself, so do human beings create through a process of imagination. While our culture might teach us to mistrust this process, there is a long tradition that holds that it is one threshold to discovering what is most real. The one making the exercises must imagine and choose time and again in order allowing the imagination to deepen, in so doing becoming faithful to the good spirit that guides it.

Exploration

- Try the exercise proposed by Rob at the end of the chapter: ‘Use your memory and imagination to recall the sensory details of that place and the feel of being there. Ask your imagination if the spirit of that place has a desire—for you, for others, or in some other way. Give it a try.’

Exercise

1. What is meant by ‘faithful imagination’?
2. What role does spiritual conversation play in developing a faithful imagination?
3. Can let your imagination run wild in imaginative contemplation?
4. What would happen if we applied a faithful imagination to explore solutions to the current ecological crisis?

CHAPTER NINE

Teaching Spiritual Direction as if God Were Real

Framework

The responsiveness between a human being and God is an experience that must be treated as real. Spiritual direction makes an implicit relationship explicit so that, by lingering upon it, its reality can unfold and deepen in manifold ways. A spiritual director must be gifted with belief, insight, skill and a grain of confidence in order to help someone grow in awareness of where God is working.

Exploration

- Examine the proposed model of spiritual direction:
 1. Listen to what a person is saying.
 2. Notice (and help the person to notice) his or her implicit experience of God.
 3. Help it become explicit experience of God.
 4. Stay with it and deepen it, let it come into the present, let it develop.
 5. Encourage it to become ‘conversational’.
- How could you apply this model in your practice of spiritual direction or even everyday conversations?

Exercise

1. ‘Over several months, my director’s gentle persistence and belief in God’s reality (not to mention her insight and skill) paid off...’ How might you be persistent about believing God’s reality in your practice of spiritual direction?
2. What role do a director’s expectations have in shaping a spiritual conversation?

3. 'The director's essential task remains to help the directee notice and develop the encounter with God already implicit in his or her experience.' What are the ways in which other interests in spiritual direction could distract from this essential task?

4. How do belief, insight, skill and confidence contribute to good spiritual direction?

CHAPTER TEN

An Advent Examen

Framework

In this short essay Rob makes the connection between the season of Advent and the Ignatian Examen, a prayer devised by St Ignatius to help people find God in all things. His approach is to invite us to share our story before God, distinguishing the plot lines that occur under the influence of the good and bad spirits. The Examen allows God to surprise us with what has been happening and leads us to focus not just on the story but on the storyteller.

Exploration

- Think of one story you habitually tell about yourself.
- Was God the author of that story, or did it emerge under another influence?

Exercise

1. How does the season of Advent connect with a prayer that focuses on letting God be the author of our story?
2. When and where did you first learn to do a daily Examen? Who was it that taught it to you?
3. Describe your own experience of how the Examen prayer has helped you.
4. What does it mean to focus on the storyteller rather than the story?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ecology, Angels and Virtual Reality: A Triptych

Framework

The triptych of ecology, angels and virtual reality provides a background against which to see the whole of this collection. It is the human imagination that connects these three panels together. Rob begins by wondering whether the ‘spirit of place’ could be a created spirit like the angels who are mediators of God’s action. For us to affirm both that the earth is alive and that human beings have a special place within it, we can turn to angels as mediators of God’s presence. Since imagination serves a similar role in our relationship with God, Ignatius viewed it as a kind of interface with this spiritual realm. If imagination is the place where the invisible becomes visible, then virtual reality performs a similar function as a way of articulating forms of feeling. In effect, our world is the consequence of the invisible becoming visible. And therefore we must honour creation as the threshold to the divine through our discernment of spirits.

Exploration

- ‘How do I place my feet upon this prairie? How can we know what to do? How can we have the will to do it? Only by listening slowly to the heart; only by waiting on the whispers of angels; only by standing still and vulnerable, long enough to be touched by the spirit of the place.’ Take a moment to stand where you are and ask yourself the same questions ...

Exercise

1. 'We have treated 'nature' as a voiceless commodity to be consumed on demand and we are now beginning to live under the fear of the consequences.' What are the spiritual consequences of this reality?
2. Apart from the split between 'human' and 'nature' what other dualisms do you perceive around you? How have these become obstacles to discernment of spirits?
3. Both the imagination and the angels are mediators of the presence of God. What does this mean for our understanding of the good and bad spirit?
4. 'It is the viewer, the one standing and looking, who has to make it a whole.' As you finish reading Rob's book, take a step back, relive the process with which you have engaged, and just give thanks.

*This leaflet is available to download as a PDF from:
www.theway.org.uk/imagination*