



“Praying with your Imagination”

This blog post from William Barry, SJ, is a reflection on David Fleming's Book, "What is Ignatian Spirituality", which Ignatian Volunteers are using for spiritual reflection in many regions this service year.

David Fleming refers to Ignatius' day dreams while recovering from his battle wound. When I try to explain what the discernment of spirits means, I usually begin with this experience of Ignatius' two kinds of day dreams because they can remove some of the mystery of what discernment of spirits is. After all, Ignatius was not praying when he made his discovery of how God and Satan, whom Ignatius calls the “enemy of human nature,” make their presence felt; he was engaging in day dreaming, and one set of day dreams had nothing to do with God or religion since it had to do with dreaming of the deeds of derring-do he would accomplish to win the favor of a great lady, a day dream, he tells us, that might last for hours. When he began to read the only books available, a life of Christ and a book of lives of saints, he would intersperse his first day dream with dreams of what he would do for Christ, and of how he would outdo the great saints in feats of asceticism. These too would last for hours. He enjoyed both sets of day dreams very much. For a long time Ignatius did not notice that there was a difference in how he felt after the dreams. But one day he paid attention to the fact that after the dreams of doing great deeds to win the lady he felt dry and out of sorts, while after the dreams about the following Christ and the saints he continued to feel content and happy afterwards. He came to the conclusion that God and Satan had been working on him, Satan encouraging the knightly day dreams, God the dreams of following Christ. This insight was the beginning of a life time of paying attention to his emotional states as well as his thoughts and reactions so as to distinguish the ways of God from the ways of the enemy.

It is very enlightening to take seriously how Ignatius learned how to discern the spirits. It was not through a learned treatise, but through the experience of paying attention to his thoughts and emotions as he engaged in day dreaming, something that seems very far from anything spiritual or religious. When you read that Ignatian spirituality aims to help people to find God in all things, remember that this is where it started. If God can be found in day dreams, then God can be found everywhere. All that is required is that we pay attention to what is happening to us as we go through life. In fact, we are always in the presence of God because God is always creating this universe and trying to move human beings to join him in the great work of bringing about the Kingdom of God. God is always present and aware of us; we, of course, are most often not aware of God's presence. But we can become more aware by learning to pay attention to our reactions to the world around us. For me the most important reason for engaging in an examen of

consciousness at least once a day is not to look at sins, but to become more attuned to the presence of God in our ordinary lives.

*Fr. Bill Barry, SJ is a Spiritual Reflector for IVC New England. He entered the Society of Jesus in 1950 and was ordained in 1962. He earned a Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the University of Michigan in 1968. He has taught at the University of Michigan, Weston Jesuit School of Theology, and Boston College. Bill is the author or co-author of 20 books, including *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, *God and You*, *Finding God in All Things*, *Spiritual Direction and the Encounter with God*, *Who Do You Say I Am?*, *Contemplatives in Action*, and *A Friendship like No Other*. For more on his writing please visit [Loyola Press](#).*