

What Is Distinctive about Ignatian Spiritual Direction?

Spiritual direction is a feature of many Christian traditions. In fact, forms of spiritual direction are found in all religions. What distinguishes Ignatian spiritual direction from other approaches? The Irish Jesuit Brian O’Leary lists these elements.

A theological vision rooted in the Spiritual Exercises. The theology of the Exercises^[1] is optimistic. It affirms the goodness of the world. But it also is acutely aware of the pervasive problem of evil. At the same time it is contemplative and service-oriented.

Flexible. The Ignatian spiritual director does not impose a program on the directee. The manner of the direction is adjusted to fit the person’s personality, life history, and spiritual experience. The director “cannot know beforehand what he or she will suggest.”

A partnership. Ignatian spiritual direction is a partnership. It thus demands mutual respect and openness to the other’s frame of reference. It follows Ignatius Loyola’s admonition, “Let it be presupposed that every good Christian is to be more ready to save their neighbor’s proposition than to condemn it.”

What do you really want? Ignatian spiritual direction attempts to uncover the deepest desires of the human heart. Typically, these are smothered by superficial desires for transitory things. Our most profound desires are shaped by the Holy Spirit and point toward new choices for spiritual growth and fruitful service.

Rules for discernment. Ignatius Loyola’s rules for discernment of spirits^[2] permeate Ignatian spiritual direction. These are methods for identifying inner movements, reflecting on them, and understanding where they come from and where they lead us.

(See Brian O’Leary, SJ, “What Is Specific to an Ignatian Model of Spiritual Direction?”
The Way, Jan/April 2008, pp. 9-28).

1. <http://ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/what-are-the-spiritual-exercises/>
2. <http://ignatianspirituality.com/making-good-decisions/discernment-of-spirits/introduction-to-discernment-of-spirits/>