Book Review – First Belong to God: On Retreat with Pope Francis

Oh my, what a special treat we have with this magnificent book! In “First Belong to God”, we have the opportunity to receive “guidance” from the Pope Francis and gain encouragement and support from the work of author Austen Ivereigh as we participate in a wonderful eight-day spiritual retreat.

“Each of the eight days is designed to facilitate a ‘primary encounter’ with Jesus as an experience, rather than an idea, one that changes our horizon and opens us to a new imagination of what’s possible in our lives and in our world.”

Ivereigh, British writer, journalist, and Fellow in Contemporary Church History at Campion Hall, University of Oxford, has designed this retreat guide around the “Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius” and encourages us to “come out of ourselves and overcome temptations that keep us from deepening our discipleship.” “The Spiritual Exercises is a compilation of meditations, prayers, and other contemplative practices for helping people develop their openness and responsiveness to God.” (jesuitseastois.org)

Utilizing Ignatius’s work and drawing from the wisdom of Pope Francis, Ivereigh provides us plenty of things to ponder on during each day of the retreat and through the Spiritual Exercises, we have the opportunity to experience a renewed personal encounter with Jesus. Personally, I really liked Ivereigh’s “Point of Reflection” questions provided each day of the retreat. They seemed to create an openness that allowed my heart to listen to God communicating with me.

My experiences by reading and spending time pondering the eight-day “exercises” were highlighted by several different “Aha” moments and new insights. For example, on Day One, I experienced a “Aha” moment as I discovered confirmation through Thomas Merton’s words. According to Merton, “There is a virginal point where things begin anew, an innocence for which we were created, which we have lost and which we can regain.”

One of the most significant insights I gained came on Day Three. This is where I found the Ignatius examen, a Spiritual Exercise that includes “five steps for reviewing our life to see where and how faith has freed us from ‘the world.’” And perhaps, the highlight of the retreat for me came on Day Eight (A New Imagination of the Possible). It was here that Ignatius’s exercise “Contemplation to attain the love of God” is practiced. This exercise “helps us go out of ourselves and into deeper belongingness with the Creator, creation, and our fellow creatures.”

Though I never had the opportunity to be in the presence of Pope Francis, reading through this book I felt as though he was with me guiding my thoughts and meditation each day of the retreat. Hats off to Ivereigh for being able to capture and present the real essence of Francis’ message consistently throughout this book.

Writing this review has been challenging as there is much more to say about this magnificent book than what I can provide without telling the entire “story.” The bottom-line, is that I highly recommend “First Belong to God” and encourage you to read the book and participate in a retreat which I believe could “deepen your discipleship!” The book can also be used as a resource for a group retreat.