The rediscovery of discernment as a vital personal and communal practice was part of the aggiornamento of the 1960s and ’70s. Many of the handbooks and studies of discernment that were authored then are still valid and helpful today. This short review, however, will focus on books (and a few articles) appearing in the last ten years or so.

For a sampling of fresh perspectives on discernment, a good place to begin is with The Way Supplement 85 (1996). Nine essays treat such issues as foundations of discernment, Scripture, psychology, culture, conflict, and pluralism. For those who prefer to read a story first, try out Nora Gallagher’s Practicing Resurrection: A Memoir of Work, Doubt, Discernment, and Moments of Grace. Gallagher engagingly chronicles the discernment of her vocation to the Episcopalian priesthood in the midst of church politics, a marriage still “under construction,” and all the ordinary challenges of work, friendship, and studies.

Mark McIntosh’s Discernment and Truth: Meditations on the Christian Life of Contemplation and Practice is the best recent book that explores discernment with historical and theological depth. In the first chapter he develops a circular schema of five aspects of discernment, arrayed between its contemplative grounding and its orientation to active practice. (1) Beginning at the level of a basic contemplative attitude toward life, all discernment is necessarily grounded in a loving and trusting relationship with God. (2) The second move concerns the urge to distinguish between impulses that move us toward action in harmony with God, or which move us in the opposite direction. (3) When action itself is in focus, discernment is practical wisdom or discretion that guides one in everyday choices. (4) Engaging the contemplative dimension again, discernment asks how to follow God’s will in all things. (5) In its final movement, discernment becomes “illumination, contemplative wisdom, a noetic relationship with God that irradiates and facilitates knowledge of every kind of truth.” After reviewing a wide range of historical perspectives on discernment in the middle chapters of

Mary Frohlich, R.S.C.J., teaches spirituality at Catholic Theological Union. She is author of Praying with Scripture (Center for Learning) and co-editor with Virginia Manss of The Lay Contemplative (St. Anthony’s Messenger Press).
the book, McIntosh brings his study to a culmination by reclaiming the patristic and Augustinian theology of illumination for today.

One of the strengths of McIntosh’s approach is that he engages the entire trajectory of Christian reflection on discernment, from biblical to modern times. His bibliography is a guide to the wide range of resources available on the history of discernment. Another excellent book that zeroes in on the biblical teaching on discernment and at the same time explores implications for ecclesial life today, is *Scripture and Discernment: Decision-making in the Church* by Luke Timothy Johnson. For a very short survey of the history of this Christian practice, see Joan Mueller, “The Theology of Discernment: A New Historical Overview” in *Studies in Formative Spirituality* 12 (February 1991).

A great many books on discernment focus almost entirely on the insights and methods of Ignatius of Loyola. A most creative recent book on the Ignatian approach is *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women*. Authors Katherine Dyckman, Mary Garvin, and Elizabeth Liebert employed a feminist method in their own work of collaborative writing as they placed the “militant” Exercises in a mutually critical conversation with feminist psychology and theology.

Anyone doing serious study of Ignatius’s contributions to discernment will also need to read the magisterial works of the late Jules J. Toner, *A Commentary on St. Ignatius’ Rules for the Discernment of Spirits and Discerning God’s Will: Ignatius of Loyola’s Teaching on Christian Decision Making*. He also wrote two accompanying casebooks to assist individual and group study of these discernment processes: *Spirit of Light or Darkness* and *What is Your Will, O God?* While not new, Toner’s works still stand as the best in-depth studies of Ignatian discernment. They continue to be available from the Institute of Jesuit Sources.

For those looking for a more practical Ignatian handbook, Maureen Conroy’s *The Discerning Heart: Discovering a Personal God* may be one of the best that is still in print. Writing primarily for spiritual directors, Conroy focuses on learning to discern interior affective movements, and the role this plays in the lifelong process of development in closeness to God. Pierre Wolff’s *Discernment: The Art of Choosing Well* is another user-friendly text, but it is more focused on what to do when confronted with specific occasions requiring choice. He perhaps promises too much when he entitles one chapter, “Discernment Is to Choose Methodically with God.” Nonetheless, his approach is basically well-grounded.

Wolff includes a good section on discernment by groups, distinguishing between a group which helps one person to discern and a group which discerns a common decision. A practical book length treatment on how a group can help an individual discern is Rose Mary Dougherty’s *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment*. Another useful approach to how a group can discern together is developed by Mary Benet McKinney in “Discerning Community Leadership,” an essay in *Review for Religious* 58 (July–August 1999). Her full-length treatment of this question, *Sharing Wisdom: A Process for Group Decision-Making*, is unfortunately out of print.

Donna Steffen’s *Discerning Disciples: Listening for God’s Voice in Christian Initiation* is designed to teach those who minister in RCIA processes how to be “discerning listeners” in appropriate ways at each stage of the initiation process. It includes a short introduction to basic theological principles of discernment, plus practical guidelines for a range of discer-
ment processes. Although clearly focused on the RCIA, it could also be used to train lay ministers on a broader scale.

Another book that develops practical processes for a specific type of group is *Claiming All Things for God: Prayer, Discernment, and Ritual for Social Change* by George D. McClain. McClain wrote this book out of concern that his social activism had become disconnected from his personal prayer life. He focuses on how activist groups can develop rituals that repair this rift. In doing so, they begin to make their social justice choices within a process of communal discernment.

The recently re-issued *Spiritual Discernment and Politics: Guidelines for Religious Communities* by the Brazilian Jesuit J. B. Libanio brings a liberation theology perspective to the topic. Libanio analyzes the structure of discernment in its relation to concrete historical and political mediations of the kenotic Word of God. He counsels unflinching honesty about how one’s social position can be a source of “inordinate affections,” and points to a generous option for the poor and intensive prayer as the primary prerequisites of this politically-situated discernment.

*Sickness or Sin?: Spiritual Discernment and Differential Diagnosis*, edited by John T. Chirban, is an anthology of articles by Greek Orthodox theologians and psychologists. The book contains essays on the Orthodox perspective on human and spiritual development, a detailed case study involving a person who is mentally ill, a model for training clergy, and a variety of other topics. Not all the essays are equally relevant to a study of discernment, but they nonetheless open a window into a stimulating dialogue between professional psychologists and Orthodox theologians of various stripes.

Another study that opens up new territory is Evan B. Howard’s *Affirming the Touch of God: A Psychological and Philosophical Exploration of Christian Discernment*. Beginning from an interest in both charismatic phenomena and more everyday problems of discernment, Howard brings empirical psychology into dialogue with the philosophical theology of Donald Gelpi and the historical discernment texts of Ignatius of Loyola and Jonathan Edwards. The psychology chapter develops an empirical description of discernment under the rubric “Categorization and Affectivity,” demonstrating concretely what it means to say that discernment is “an affectively-rich act of knowing.” His survey of literature is also useful, highlighting key studies of the twentieth century.

**References**


