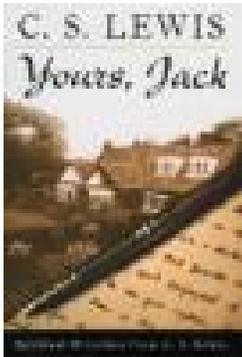


Letters from C.S. Lewis offer *espiritual companionship*

Mitch Finley Catholic News Service Catholic News Service | Aug. 6, 2008



YOURS, JACK: SPIRITUAL DIRECTION FROM C.S. LEWIS edited by Paul F. Ford.

HarperOne (2008), 374 pp., \$23.95

C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), a British Anglican author and professor of English literature, first at Oxford, then at Cambridge, wrote numerous books that continue to sell not just well but very well more than four decades after his death. The name in the title of this book comes from his nickname, "Jack," used by friends and family, and which he preferred to his given name of Clive Staples.

It's no surprise whenever a new collection of C.S. Lewis material comes out in book form, given his continuing popularity. The theme that unites the hundreds of letters in this volume is the author's experience and practice of the art of spiritual direction.

The editor, Paul F. Ford, organized the letters chronologically, the earliest from 1916, the latest from 1963. An index makes it easier to locate specific topics or themes discussed by Lewis. Students and scholars of Lewis may be well advised to take the index as incomplete, however. Thomas Merton's name appears in the book, for example, but not in the index.

Nowadays, the meaning of "spiritual direction" is sometimes elusive, depending on the theological orientation or preferences of the one using the term. Ford describes three kinds of letters in this book -- letters of spiritual companionship, spiritual discipleship and spiritual direction.

Lewis lived during the first half of the 20th century. As a young man he became an atheist, then converted to Anglicanism, and he was tolerant of the faith of others unless it struck him as narrow-minded or a distortion of the truth.

Lewis was not one to withhold praise from a Catholic author such as G.K. Chesterton; indeed, he says in one letter that Chesterton was one of the main influences on his decision to abandon atheism. In a letter dated 1950, he called Chesterton's "The Everlasting Man" "the best popular apologetic I know." In 1941, Lewis also heartily recommended -- "in small doses" -- the 15th-century Catholic spiritual classic "The Imitation of Christ," by Thomas a Kempis.

It seems that C.S. Lewis was reluctant to describe himself as a spiritual director. For example, in a 1954 letter he

declared, "I am certainly unfit to advise anyone else on the devotional life." He goes on, however, to share his own rules for prayer: "(1) To make sure that, wherever else they may be placed, the main prayers should not be put 'last thing at night.' (2) To avoid introspection in prayer, I mean not to watch one's own mind to see if it is in the right frame, but always to turn the attention outwards to God. (3) Never, never to try to generate an emotion by willpower. (4) To pray without words when I am able, but to fall back on words when tired or otherwise below par."

Lewis is anything but esoteric in this collection of letters. In fact, he is thoroughly and delightfully everyday and down-to-earth, including comments that may mystify the reader regarding their relevance to anyone's spiritual direction. One sample: in a 1962 letter he remarks that "it is strange that anyone should dislike cats. But cats themselves are the worst offenders in this respect. They very seldom seem to like one another."

Yours, Jack is a valuable collection of informal observations, off-the-cuff advice and wry remarks from a 20th-century Christian author whose works continue to affect countless readers in our own time.

(Finley is the author of more than 30 books for Catholics including, most recently, *The Rosary Handbook: A Guide for Newcomers, Old-Timers and Those In Between*, The Word Among Us Press.)

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