

How Ignatian Spirituality Gives Us a Way to Discern God's Will

By David L. Fleming, SJ

From *What Is Ignatian Spirituality?*

What shall we *do*? We should not do anything wicked and we should not do anything absurd. Between these boundaries lie a vast number of possibilities. We face large decisions: schooling, career, work, state of life, relationships, weighty commitments. Every day we face smaller decisions about our priorities and goals, how to spend our time, what to pay attention to and what to put off for another day. How do we make these choices? How do we weigh competing values? How do we discern the right path?

Ignatian spirituality gives us a way to approach these questions. To follow Jesus we need to know how to make good decisions. Ignatian spirituality helps us approach this challenge in a practical way.

What Do We Want?

Ignatius would first have us be clear about the ends that we seek. Again we return to the Principle and Foundation for clarity about the values that should govern our choices. Everything in this world is presented to us "so that we can know God more easily and make a return of love more readily." Thus, "our only desire and our one choice should be this: I want and I choose what better leads to God's deepening life in me." Our loving relationship with God is the goal and end of our life. All of our choices are means, steps toward reaching our goal. We enter marriage or choose a career or start a business as a way to deepen our relationship with God. All of these important choices are means, not ends in themselves. It is easy to lose sight of this and treat choices as the ends. Our first choice or decision is simply to be a follower of Christ. Everything else—all our choices, big and small—follows from this.

The Analytical Approach

When we have our end clearly in sight, then we are able to tackle the complexities of decision making. One way is the analytical approach. In trying to choose between two goods, we might list pros and cons in two columns on a sheet of paper. If we are perplexed, we might also ask some friends what they think. Then we make a decision, offer our decision to God for his blessing, and pray for a consolation of peace as God's gift to us.

Ignatius calls this type of decision making a “third-time” choice. “First-time” and “second-time” choices are decisions guided by our hearts, where confirmation comes not from the reasoning intellect but through a discernment of the meaning of the different movements of the emotions and feelings. This is Ignatius’s greatest gift to us about decision making. It may be called the gift of the reasoning heart.

Sometimes the Choice Is Clear

A first-time choice is a decision that is unmistakably clear. We *know* what is right. Ignatius cites two examples of first-time choice in the New Testament: the conversion of the apostle Paul, and the call of the tax collector Matthew. Neither man had any doubt about what God wanted of him (at least in these situations). First-time choices are not rare. We probably know people who never had any doubt about what they should do at major turning points in their lives. Some people are sure about their marriage spouse at a first meeting in this graced manner. Others are sure about their religious-life vocation or priestly vocation in a similar way. You may have had this experience yourself, at least in some circumstances.

When the Choice Isn’t So Clear

Second-time choices are situations where the preferred choice is not entirely clear. We are presented with alternative courses of action that all seem attractive to some degree, and we are not blessed with the gift of a clear certainty about what to do. In these cases, Ignatius says that we can discern the right choice by attending to the inner movements of our spirit. In particular, feelings of “consolation” and “desolation” will signal the correct course of action. Ignatius always carefully puts the word *spiritual* before consolation and desolation. For him spiritual consolation is our experience “when some interior movement in the soul is caused, through which the soul comes to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord.” Ignatius more simply describes consolation as every increase in hope, faith, and charity. Spiritual desolation is just the opposite. The words Ignatius uses to describe it include darkness of soul, disturbance, movement to things low and earthly, disquiet of different agitations and temptations. Ignatius’s understanding of the importance of these feelings dates back to the very beginning of his conversion to a fervent Christian faith when he learned to pay close attention to his feelings.

Second-time choice is not simply a matter of “feeling peaceful” about a proposed decision. The feelings of spiritual consolation and spiritual desolation must be carefully assessed. Complacency and smugness about a decision can masquerade as

consolation. At times, desolation can be a timely sense of restlessness pointing us in a new direction. Ignatius discusses how to work with his guidelines for discerning at some length in his “rules for discernment of spirits” at the end of the Spiritual Exercises.

Trusting Your Feelings

It seems surprising (and somewhat risky) to trust our feelings to the degree Ignatius does, but this approach to discernment is entirely consistent with his vision of the Christian life. The Ignatian perspective tells us that we live in a world that is permeated by God, a world God uses to keep in touch with us. We seek to follow Jesus. We carefully observe him in the Gospels and we enter into these Gospel scenes using the methods of Ignatian contemplation through imagination. We come to know who Jesus is and strive to make him the center of our lives. We make our decisions within the context of this relationship of love. It is a relationship of the heart. Our heart will tell us which decisions will bring us closer to Jesus and which will take us away from him.

Ignatian discernment, then, holds that our Christian choices are often beyond the merely rational or reasonable. “The heart has its reasons of which the mind knows nothing,” Pascal said. This is fine—as long as the heart has been schooled by Christ.

It is often said that Ignatian spirituality forms us to be “contemplatives in action.” We can understand this somewhat paradoxical term if we see that the goal is action and discernment is the means. Discernment guides us to decisions that will join us ever more closely with Christ and with our working with Christ in the world. Contemplation of Jesus in the Gospels is the essential discipline that makes discernment possible. The practice of imaginative prayer teaches us who Jesus is and how he acts and how he decides. This kind of contemplation schools our hearts and guides us to the decisions that bring us closer to God.

Excerpt from *What Is Ignatian Spirituality?* by David L. Fleming, SJ.

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