

## DISCERNING THE WILL OF GOD

*Spiritual Exercises*, 1: “By the term ‘Spiritual Exercises’ is meant every method of examination of conscience, of meditation, of contemplation, of vocal and mental prayer, and of other spiritual activities that will be mentioned later. For just as taking a walk, journeying on foot, and running are bodily exercises, so we call Spiritual Exercises every way of *preparing* and *disposing* the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and, after their removal, of *seeking and finding* the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul.”

### THE QUESTION: WHAT CHOICE DOES GOD WANT?

**Kenneth** is struggling financially. He knows that if he does not inform his employer of a recent transaction with a customer, he will be able to retain a greater share of the profits from this transaction.

**Barbara** meets with her doctor. He tells her that the child she is expecting may have a disability, and gently suggests that she may wish to consider a termination of her pregnancy.

**Ruth** is married and has three small children; life is busy for her and her husband. Ruth sings well, and the choir director asks if she would lead the singing for the Holy Week services in the parish. Ruth loves such singing and service. She also knows that this commitment will involve many hours of practicing with the choir, in addition to the ceremonies themselves.

**Anthony** is under pressure to complete a business project in the next few days. He had planned to spend an hour with his eight-year-old son this evening, but now wonders whether he may need to dedicate this time to the business project.

**Lisa** says hello to her friend, Diane, after Mass on Sunday. The thought occurs to her to invite Diane to a talk on prayer, on Wednesday evening, in the parish. She wonders whether she should mention this to Diane.

**Fr. Rainero Cantalamessa:** *when I must decide* “to make or not make a journey, to do a job, to make a visit, to buy something.... I’ll first ask [God] by the simple means of prayer that is at everyone’s disposal, if it is his will that I make that journey, do that job, make that visit, buy that object, and then I’ll act or not.... I have submitted the question to God. I have emptied myself of my own will. I have renounced deciding for myself and I have given God the chance to intervene in my life if he so wishes.... Just as a faithful servant never takes an order from an outsider without saying, ‘I must first ask my master,’ so the true servant of God undertakes nothing without saying to himself, ‘I must first pray a little to know what my Lord wants of me!’ The will of God thus penetrates one’s existence more and more, making it more precious and rendering it a ‘living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God’ (Rm 12:1).” *Obedience: The Authority of the Word*, 56-57.

**In small daily choices:**

1. Pray
2. Review the factors
3. Make our best decision
4. Do it with peace
5. Review and learn

**Larger choices:** Choices of career or changes of career; decisions about new ministries; proposals to one's bishop, religious superior, or boss at work; decisions to relocate with the family; alternatives for the disposal of property; training to be a spiritual director; choices to pursue advanced studies; the decision to adopt a child; and so forth.

*Significant choices, in which both options are good, and the person is free to choose either.*

**THE FOUNDATION: WHY DO I WANT TO DO GOD'S WILL?**

**St. Ignatius, Spiritual Exercises, "Principle and Foundation"** (contemporary reading): God created us out of love so that we might praise and reverence his infinite love and goodness, and by dedicating our lives to his service, might enter an eternity of joyful communion with him.

God created all the other things on the earth for us, to help us attain this purpose for which he created us.

As a result, we should appreciate and use these gifts of God—places, occupations, relationships, material possessions, and all the other blessings of God's creation—insofar as they help toward the purpose for which we are created, and we should let them go insofar as they hinder our attainment of this purpose.

Consequently, in choices in which we are free to choose among various options, we must hold ourselves as in a balance with regard to these gifts of God's creation. This means that for our part we do not set our desires on health rather than sickness, wealth rather than poverty, being held in honor rather than in little esteem, a long life rather than a short life, and likewise in all the rest.

Our only desire and choice is for what better leads us to the purpose for which God created us: to praise and serve him in this life, and so enter the joy of eternal life.

**Blessed John Henry Newman:** "We are all created to his glory—we are created to do his will. I am created to do something or to be something for which no one else is created; I have a place in God's counsels, in God's world, which no one else has... God knows me and calls me by my name. God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission."

## **THE DISPOSITION: OPENNESS TO WHATEVER GOD WILLS**

**Ignatius:** Consequently, in choices in which we are free to choose among various options, we must hold ourselves as in a balance with regard to these gifts of God's creation. This means that for our part we do not set our desires on health rather than sickness, wealth rather than poverty, being held in honor rather than in little esteem, a long life rather than a short life, and likewise in all the rest. (*SpirEx*, 23).

## **THE MEANS**

**Learn about the Options**

**Holy Eucharist**

**Sacred Scripture**

**Silence**

**Spiritual Accompaniment**

## **DISCERNMENT: THE THREE MODES**

### **The First Mode: Clarity beyond Doubting**

**Ignatius:** *The first time* is when God Our Lord so moves and attracts the will that, without doubting or being able to doubt, the devout soul follows what is shown to it, as St. Paul and St. Matthew did in following Christ our Lord.

*Three elements:*

- something is shown to a person (“the devout soul follows *what is shown* to it”),
- the person’s will is drawn to what is shown (“God Our Lord *so moves and attracts the will*”),
- and the person cannot doubt that what is shown, and what so draws the will, is truly God’s will (“*without doubting or being able to doubt*”).

**Anne:** A religious experience occurred in November of Anne’s senior year of high school. Religious life as a lifestyle had never been a consideration for her. She remembers asking out of curiosity what kind of girl could become a nun. After naming some qualifications, sister turned to Anne and said, “Someone like you. You could become a sister.” Anne’s response was a definite and silent, “No way!” Anne also recalls praying intensely to God and expressing her desire to do whatever he wanted her to do EXCEPT become a nun. These were the only times the subject ever came up and they were soon forgotten.

It happened on a Sunday morning, the last day of a weekend retreat made by the seniors. Anne had stopped to make a visit in the chapel. As she began to kneel down she experienced a powerful shock – like a lightning bolt that went straight through her from head to feet. She felt her whole being lifted up in a surging “yes!” She had no control over it. It was much like riding the crest of a wave – one must go with it. There were no images, no words, no arguments, no doubts, no reasoning process to make. It was decided – period! She knelt there a few seconds absorbing the impact. There was a sense of great peace and joy and direction. In fact, it was the only time she had ever experienced such certitude.

Along with the call to religious life was also the name of the religious community. All that was needed was for Anne to follow through on the decision.

The decision was tested many times. In the course of the year the certitude never changed, neither did the deep inner peace and joy....

It was this certitude and deep peace that carried her through the year, enabled her to leave home, and helped her weather the homesickness and discouragement of the novitiate. For years after, Anne would feel the powerful impact of the experience whenever she recalled it. It was a gift, and she confesses that she would never have made it [through those years] without it. It gave her a basic joyous outlook and confidence in life and the secure sense of being loved by God – a love that she could feel in a tangible way. In her late thirties, Anne went through a period of spiritual desolation. Part of the desolation, the most painful part, was the loss of that sense of God’s loving presence. And yet, in the midst of the confusion, guilt, and emptiness, the certitude of her vocation was left unshaken. It could not be doubted – when she had to believe that God was there, she knew he had chosen her to be his as a religious.

As she reflects on this, she believes that certitude comes from the fact that essentially the decision was God’s; she only freely consented to accept it, to ride along on the crest of it.

**Gary;** I would find it hard to say exactly when my calling as a priest first became clear to me. It was always there, in a sense. It was there as far back as I can remember thinking about my future, certainly already when I was in grade school. Faith was an important part of our family life, and we were always active in the parish. Catholic school also helped. So the spiritual soil for a vocation was there, though I was the only boy in the family that felt this call.

There was never any struggle about my vocation, never any searching to see whether God wanted me to be a priest. It was just clear to me and has always been clear to me since. I always had great esteem for marriage, and my parents were great examples, but I knew that it wasn't my call. I just longed to be a priest and live that life. It was all I wanted.

In my last year in college, when I had to decide what I would do, there was, in a sense, no decision to make: I knew that God wanted me to be a priest. I remember that in my last year in the seminary before I became a deacon, a retreat director said that I needed to think well about it since this was the definitive commitment. I was willing to reflect but I knew, in my heart, that it was already clear. It had always been clear. It still is today, after so many years of priesthood. I've never doubted this call and I can't doubt it. I've always been grateful to God for that.

### **The Second Mode: An Attraction of the Heart**

**Ignatius:** *The second time* is when sufficient clarity and understanding is received through experience of consolations and desolations, and through experience of discernment of different spirits.

#### **Discernment of spirits:**

##### **Spiritual Consolation**

**Ignatius: Third Rule.** The third is of spiritual consolation. I call it consolation when some interior movement is caused in the soul, through which the soul comes to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord, and, consequently when it can love no created thing on the face of the earth in itself, but only in the Creator of them all. Likewise when it sheds tears that move to love of its Lord, whether out of sorrow for one's sins, or for the passion of Christ our Lord, or because of other things directly ordered to his service and praise. Finally, I call consolation every increase of hope, faith and charity, and all interior joy that calls and attracts to heavenly things and to the salvation of one's soul, quieting it and giving it peace in its Creator and Lord.

### Spiritual Desolation

**Ignatius: Fourth Rule.** The fourth is of spiritual desolation. I call desolation all the contrary of the third rule, such as darkness of soul, disturbance in it, movement to low and earthly things, disquiet from various agitations and temptations, moving to lack of confidence, without hope, without love, finding oneself totally slothful, tepid, sad and, as if separated from one's Creator and Lord. For just as consolation is contrary to desolation, in the same way the thoughts that come from consolation are contrary to the thoughts that come from desolation.

**St. Ignatius, *Spiritual Diary*** (February 2-7, 1544): 1. Saturday – Deep devotion at Mass, with tears and increased confidence in Our Lady, and more inclination to complete poverty then and throughout the day.

2. Sunday – The same, and more inclination to no revenue then, and throughout the day.

3. Monday – The same, and with other feelings, and more inclined to no revenue throughout the day....

4. Tuesday – An abundance of devotion before Mass, during it and after it, tears.... I...felt more inclined to perfect poverty at the time and throughout the day....

5. Wednesday – Devotion before Mass and during it, not without tears, more inclined to perfect poverty....

6. Thursday – Before Mass with deep devotion and tears, and a notable warmth and devotion all through the day, being always moved more to perfect poverty....

(March 12) When the mass was finished and I was in my room afterward, I found myself utterly deserted and without any help, unable to feel the presence of my mediators or of the Divine Persons, but feeling so remote and so separated from them as if I had never felt their presence and never would again.

Thoughts came to me at times against Jesus, at times against another Person, finding myself confused with various thoughts such as to leave the house and rent a room in order to get away from the noise, or to fast, or to begin the masses all over again, or to move the altar to a higher floor in the house. I could find rest in nothing, desiring to end in a time of consolation and with my heart totally satisfied.

**Richard** *was discerning between marriage and Jesuit religious life. In January of that year, he decided that God was calling him to marriage; yet he was unable to find peace. He recounts the experience that resolved his struggle:* The presence of sensible consolation when I reflected on joining the Jesuits was absolutely crucial for giving me the strength to make this decision. In retrospect it seems as though the Lord “tricked” me through this means to get past my own

selfishness. Beginning in January of my senior year I began experiencing consolation during prayer in a way I never experienced before in my life. Indeed this was the beginning of my awakening to the Holy Spirit. I recall going up to church, sitting in front of the Sacred Heart altar and being absolutely overwhelmed. This was the first time I had ever experienced this type of enjoyment from being with God. And this consolation was present whenever I reflected seriously on the possibility of entering the Jesuits. If I began to lose this desire, I would simply return to my parish church, sit in front of the Sacred Heart altar, and again that consolation would be given me. Throughout this period I knew instinctively that this was the right decision for me because of this consolation. I had not the slightest knowledge of a technical process for finding God's will by reflecting on my inner experience nor did I have the help of a counselor. I simply had a confirmation of sensible consolation....

*Richard applied to the Jesuits in March and, five months later, in August, entered the community. Of those five intervening months, he says:* I recall that I experienced many doubts in my own decision to enter the Jesuits between the period of March to August. But whenever I went to the church and sat in silence, my experience of peace was restored and with it the conviction that God was calling me.

**Jessica:** My life is like a symphony (I'm an organist). The opening theme was when I was in high school, sixteen or seventeen years old. There was an elusive kind of feeling, like a magnet drawing me. I loved being in church, the liturgy, the music. It all drew me.

Before high school I had thought of religious life, but not a lot. I just used to admire the sisters. But I didn't put too much thought into it. I dated. I had a couple of boyfriends, and I enjoyed life.

One day during religion class, when I was a senior in high school, I looked out the window. I could see the Cross on the top of the steeple of the parish church. I was drawn to that like a magnet drawing me.

I went to daily Mass. There was something about Mass that drew me. I used to love to listen to the Scriptures. "Being drawn like a magnet" was a happy experience. There was a stillness about it. I used to like to look at the Cross, listen to the music in church, all of this.

*During our conversation, I asked Jessica if she could describe the happiness she felt in "being drawn like a magnet."* She answered: I entered into it. It was so elusive. I would watch the cantor, the incense, the stain-glass windows. I was just so involved in it. And I felt alone with it – I couldn't share it. I didn't think anyone would understand this. It was just being in this kind of atmosphere, being still, and enjoying it.

At times I would be at a dance and it would be fun, but I always felt that there was something more for me. And the "more" was God. As a junior in high school, I was seriously thinking about religious life. By the time I was a senior, I knew. There wasn't one moment. It was a process, over time.

I'd be at a dance or at a symphony or other social events, and I'd know there was more for me. I'd be happy with people, with friends. I'd be joyful, having a good time, but I'd feel like there was more for me, more that was drawing me. The "more" was God calling me to be his bride. When I told my parents, they cried, and I said, I have to go. There was such a drawing, like a magnet draws. This is God's story with me – a love affair.

### **The Third Mode: A Preponderance of Reasons**

**Ignatius:** [**The question**] *First point.* The first point is to place before me the thing about which I wish to make a choice, such as an office or benefice to be accepted or refused, or any other thing that may be the object of a choice that can be changed.

*Second Point.* [**The disposition**] The second. It is necessary to have as my objective the end for which I am created, that is, to praise God our Lord and save my soul. In addition, I must be indifferent, without any disordered attachment, so that I am not more inclined or disposed to accept the thing before me than to refuse it, nor to refuse it rather than accept it, but that I find myself like a balance at equilibrium, ready to follow whatever I perceive to be more for the glory and praise of God our Lord and the salvation of my soul.

*Third Point.* [**The petition**] The third. To ask God our Lord that he be pleased to move my will and place in my soul what I ought to do in the matter before me that would be more for his praise and glory, using my intellect well and faithfully to go over the matter, and choosing in accord with what is pleasing to his most holy will.

*Fourth point.* [**The reasons**] The fourth. To consider by way of reasoning how many advantages or benefits accrue to me if I have the office or benefice proposed, solely for the praise of God our Lord and the salvation of my soul; and, on the contrary, to consider in the same way the disadvantages and dangers there would be in having it. Then to do the same in the second part, that is, to look at the advantages and benefits in not having it, and, in the same way, at the disadvantages and dangers in not having it.

*Fifth point.* [**The choice**] The fifth. After I have thought and reasoned in this way about every aspect of the matter before me, I will look to which alternative reason inclines more; and, in this way, according to the greater movement of reason, and not through any sensual inclination, I should come to a decision in the matter under deliberation.

*Sixth point.* [**The confirmation**] The sixth. Having made this choice or decision, the person who has made it should, with much diligence, turn to prayer before God our Lord and offer him this choice, so that his Divine Majesty may be pleased to receive and confirm it, if it is for his greater service and praise.

**Pedro de Ribadeneyra, S.J., *Life of St. Ignatius*:** When he wrote the Constitutions and when he decided something of great weight and importance, as we said, he always first consulted with the Lord about it in prayer; and the way he did this was the following. First he emptied himself of any passion or attachment which often confuse and obscure judgment so that it cannot discover as easily the radiance and light of the truth, and he placed himself, without any fixed inclination or predetermined direction, like matter ready to take any shape, in the hands of God our Lord. After this, with great energy he asked of God grace to know and to embrace the better choice. Then he considered with great attentiveness and weighed the reasons which presented themselves for one option and for the other, and the strength of each, and he compared them among themselves. Finally, he turned again to our Lord with what he had thought and what he had found, and reverently placed it all before his divine gaze, beseeching him that he would give him light to choose what would be most pleasing to him.

**Patrick:** When I was downsized by my company, I began my own business. Around the same time I had begun to get involved as a volunteer in prison ministry, and this ministry was very rewarding. After a time, the person who ran prison ministry for the diocese had to move, and I was offered the position. It was a full-time position. I said no. I didn't want a full-time job with prison ministry. I just wanted to stay as volunteer.

A few days passed and I was unsettled, not sure about this, still fighting the new position. I sought a spiritual director and told him that I've prayed but I've never discerned.

He suggested that I spend an hour a day in prayer, and gave me Scriptures for the prayer. So each day I went to the adoration chapel in the parish and prayed with a Scripture. But I didn't get any clarity yet.

Then he suggested looking at the advantages and disadvantages of taking the position and of not taking it. I did that. First I looked at the advantages of taking the position. There were a number of them. I knew the ministry well from my experience. I had the administrative skills from my career. I had a good background in theology, and that would help in directing the ministry in the diocese. I also knew that, if I took the position, I would be giving more of myself to the Lord. The disadvantages were that I would lose time for myself, time for the gym, for my grandkids, really, time to be lazy and not have to push myself. When I thought about not taking the position, all of this reversed.

I went through this exercise, but also continued with the Blessed Sacrament and Scripture. The whole process took about three weeks. That didn't matter to me; I wanted to do it well. About a week and a half into it, I found that all the selfish motives for not taking the position were gone. And it seemed like the reasons for taking the position were more solid.

Then the director gave me the passage about Bartimaeus [Mk 10:46-52]. It was a passage I knew well, and I was sitting there reading it. When Jesus asked Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" he answered, "I want to see." That's what I wanted, too. Then the last five words

of the passage really hit me: Bartimaeus “followed him on the way.” I felt something of what Bartimaeus must have felt because I too had started to lose sight in one eye a few years before, and the eye healed. It seemed to me that the Lord was asking me to follow him, too, through the prison ministry. It hit me like a ton of bricks. It was amazingly clear what the Lord wanted. I spent three more days with this Scripture, seeking confirmation.

I’ve been doing the prison ministry for four years now, and I’m still sure that the discernment was clear.

### **The Fruit of Discernment**

**St. Francis of Assisi:** Then the hand of the Lord came over St. Francis. As soon as he heard this answer and thereby knew the will of Christ, he got to his feet, all aflame with divine power, and said to Brother Masseo with great fervor, “So let us go – in the name of the Lord!”

**Dante:** “*E’n la sua voluntade è nostra pace*” (“In his will is our peace.”)