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DISCERNMENT

Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Ignatius: A Guide for Congregational Discernment

Benjamin Gensic

Abstract: *Congregations find themselves living in transformative times, but transformation is often an act of subtraction, which means congregations find themselves living in anxious times as well. Within this context, it is tempting for congregations to base decisions on either financial constraint or political expediency. However, such superficial discernment is incapable of guiding congregations wishing to respond to God's activity in the world. This author argues that Ignatius of Loyola provides congregations with an alternative.*

*To accomplish this, the author walks the reader through the basic principles of Ignatian spirituality and discernment, making suggestions for how these can impact congregational decision-making along the way. It concludes by showing how *The Deliberation* exhibits a two-sided Ignatian framework that congregations can use to settle their decision-making in prayer, worship, and personal reflection while also committing themselves to logically and objectively working toward a sense of consensus. The author advocates that such a framework is practical, Spirit-led, action-oriented, and learnable, allowing congregations to anchor their choices in the movement of the Holy Spirit and the ongoing invitation of God.*

Trying Times

Walter Brueggemann describes the Western church as a church in exile.¹ In *The Mystic Way of Evangelism*, Elaine Heath argues that the American church has entered into a state of *zerrissenheit*, "torn-to-pieces-hood."² On a far more positive note, Phyllis Tickle has popularized the birth

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 1–3, 11–12. Cited in Elaine A. Heath, *The Mystic Way of Evangelism: A Contemplative Vision for Christian Outreach* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 27.

² Heath, 81.

of Emergence Christianity, but even that joyous occasion has required a rummage sale on the part of established Christian traditions.³

Upon this backdrop, the collapse of Christendom in North America seems to have come to a head. Congregations regularly find themselves forced to adjust to their own seeming institutional irrelevance and to deal with “the demise of the status, influence, and privilege of Christianity.”⁴ Though some Christian circles have worked hard to create the impression that the Christian establishment stands firm, Douglas Hall argues that such posturing is simply illusionary. As he sees it, “the process of [Christendom’s] winding down is . . . irreversible.”⁵

Surrounded by the relics of Christian status and often feeling a responsibility to honor the past by maintaining its structures, congregations find themselves wandering in an unfamiliar wilderness. What does intentional decision-making based on foresight even look like in such a climate of crisis and change? How can congregations make holistic choices in a torn-apart world? Certainly, at this point, most will agree that basing decisions on financial constraint or political expediency has not served the church well. Congregations must lift their eyes to a higher plane if they are going to pass on their heritage to a new generation.

Discernment: The Practical Side of Perichoresis

At the heart of God there is a divine movement. Dionysius called this the “eternal activity of mutual self-bestowal of the three Divine Persons.”⁶ Jürgen Moltmann asserts that God’s existence “must be perceived in the *perichoresis* of the divine Persons.”⁷ Perichoresis is this eternal dance of making room for the other through self-surrender that makes God who God is. The overwhelming, humbling surprise is that God seems to have invited humanity into this perichoretic relationship.

Gregory of Nyssa believed that part of why God made humans in the image of God was God’s intent for humans to commune *within* the

³ See Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2012), 19-31.

⁴ Graham Hill, *Salt, Light, and a City: Introducing Missional Ecclesiology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), xxvi.

⁵ Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 161.

⁶ Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998), 47.

⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, reprint ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 150.

Godhead.⁸ Ancient Celtic traditions make clear that God intends God's people to belong in a community that is a response to, and an imitation of, the Trinity.⁹ If such is the case, one of the most important questions congregations can ask themselves is, "How is the activity of God inviting us to join in the dance?"

This is precisely why discernment becomes essential to the life of congregations. The end result of decision-making in the church is nothing less than participation in the very existence of God, in the divine movement. If God is inviting would-be witnesses to participate in new acts of grace, healing, and reconciliation, then congregations must determine how to respond in contextually sensitive ways. Discernment helps congregations join in this dance by basing their decisions on something more substantial and less divisive than majority opinion and financial reports. Discernment provides perspective in a near-sighted culture obsessed with the imminent. For congregations experiencing loss and disorientation, discernment provides the only means of intentionally responding to the refiguring work of God.

Many of today's congregation find themselves in a crisis situation, but sometimes it is precisely the experience of crisis that opens a church's eyes to new possibilities. Though growth seldom happens without pain, there is no way out of a painful condition except through a temporarily more painful phase.¹⁰ By becoming discerning communities, congregations can do more than endure pain. Crisis can become the floor upon which they learn to dance with God.

Why Ignatius?

There are many cases of congregational and communal discernment from which congregations could draw. For example, Mennonites inherit from their Anabaptist forebears a strong belief that the Holy Spirit expresses itself through communal practices, and thus, practice

⁸ Gregory of Nyssa states, "So too Spirit-bearing souls, illuminated by him, finally become spiritual themselves, and their grace is sent forth to others. From this comes knowledge of the future, understanding of mysteries, apprehension of hidden things, distribution of wonderful gifts, heavenly citizenship, a place in the choir of angels, endless joy in the presence of God, becoming like God, and, the highest of all desires, becoming God (*theon genesthai*)." Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Holy Spirit*, 23. Found in Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff, and Jean Leclercq, eds., *Christian Spirituality, Vol. 1: Origins to the Twelfth Century* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1987), 273–74.

⁹ Marva J. Dawn, *Joy in Divine Wisdom: Practices of Discernment from Other Cultures and Christian Traditions*, (Chichester: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 118.

¹⁰ Peter L Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006), 137; Edwin H. Friedman, Margaret M. Treadwell, and Edward W. Beal, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007), 202.

discernment as a process by which the Holy Spirit can guide congregations through open discussion within a context of prayer.¹¹ The Society of Friends could also provide congregations with a fairly robust process for communal discernment. Parker Palmer, who popularized a Quaker discernment process called the Clearness Committee, advocates that individuals can best hear the Spirit's internal voice within a communal setting.¹²

Using Ignatian spirituality and discernment within a congregational setting comes with its own unique challenges. *The Spiritual Exercises* is meant to guide an individual during discernment. *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, Ignatius's by-laws for all things Jesuit, has very little to say about discernment, and what it does say is meant to guide an entire religious order, which again, is not a congregation.¹³ What does Ignatius have to offer congregations?

First, Ignatian discernment appreciates the necessity of developing discernment as a communal virtue.¹⁴ One cannot assume that scared or anxious congregations have the ability to discern well, nor is it enough to simply learn discernment techniques. If congregations do not commit themselves to developing the type of character necessary to faithfully respond to God, their efforts to apply techniques will likely end in frustration. Ignatius reminds congregations that discernment is formative.

Second, an Ignatian model for congregational discernment fosters community. It is tempting for congregational leadership to take a strong sense of congregational community for granted. But what about those who see themselves as a rather marginalized, non-decision-making part of the church? In such a context, discernment must not only engage the community, but nurture the trust, confidence, and mutual-vulnerability necessary for a healthy community. Leaders must use a discernment process that empowers people with a voice and teaches every member of the congregation, including the leaders themselves, to listen for God in unexpected places and through unexpected people.

¹¹ Nancy Murphy, *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 147, 150.

¹² See Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey toward an Undivided Life*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 134–42; Palmer J. Parker, "The Clearness Committee: A Communal Approach to Discernment," accessed July 8, 2015, http://www.couragerenewal.org/PDFs/Parker-Palmer_Clearness-Committee.pdf.

¹³ Part VIII of *The Constitutions* focuses on communal life within the Society of Jesus, and only sub-chapters six and seven discuss the act of communal discernment and decision-making. See *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms* (Saint Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 316–43.

¹⁴ N. T. Wright defines a virtue as "the different strengths of character which together contribute to someone becoming a fully flourishing human being." Ignatian discernment can develop the strengths for congregations to become fully flourishing communities. See N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 34.

Finally, Ignatian discernment is, by its very nature, incarnational and relational. Ignatius did not treat God's will as a carrot on a stick or see discernment as a way for practitioners to escape their situations, but rather as a way of discovering the ongoing, loving activity of God in situations just as they are. For congregations searching for God, and searching for ways to faithfully respond to God, Ignatian discernment can act as a conduit for engaging God's relational self-revelation.

The Man behind the Legacy

Ignatius was a man "acutely aware of his condition as a traveler,"¹⁵ as an individual in transition. He had limited financial means after leaving behind his family's wealth, and similar to the twenty-first century, Ignatius lived during a time of cultural and religious transition. Though the unforeseen complications of Ignatius's turbulent life took the form of dashed hopes, political enemies, repeated imprisonments, and the natural difficulties of leading a religious community, today's congregations can empathize with the reality of unexpected and unpleasant surprises.

Such difficulties taught Ignatius that learning to discern the will of God in confusing situations is more than learning a decision-making technique. It is a way to test the winds, to check a compass, and to make sure one is headed in the right direction.¹⁶ Discernment reflected a discriminating way of life,¹⁷ and though Ignatius lived five hundred years in the past, the framework he developed to foster discernment continues to fit the times.

The Spiritual Exercises

For congregations wrestling with what it means to respond to God, Ignatian spirituality and discernment practices combine the two historically rooted goals of Christian discernment. They instruct individuals and congregations on how to differentiate between good and detrimental motivations and impulses, while also developing practitioners into virtuous Christians, producing faithful, responsive, and obedient decision-making. Few documents have influenced the practice of discernment as

¹⁵ John C. Olin, "The Idea of Pilgrimage in the Experience of Ignatius Loyola," *Church History* 48 4 (December 1, 1979): 389.

¹⁶ Kevin O'Brien, *The Ignatian Adventure: Experiencing the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius in Daily Life* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2011), 17.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Liebert, *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 23.

much as *The Spiritual Exercises*,¹⁸ and for good reason. Ignatius himself was a man who wanted to respond to personal crisis in light of God's desire for how his life should unfold. Congregations wanting to do the same can find no better mentor.

Principles and Foundations

True to its name, the "Principle and Foundation" within *The Exercises* provides the foundation for all things Ignatian. In the first clause of the "Principle and Foundation," Ignatius writes that human beings exist to "praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by means of doing this to save their souls."¹⁹ This opening line of the "Principle and Foundation" provides a context for a key component of Ignatian spirituality: the power of desire.

An important question for Ignatius was "What do you want?"²⁰ The answer to this question defined the core longing and root desire of those who would follow Jesus. God designed the human soul to be passionate and committed, and as such, desire is a primary source for some of humanity's most vital energy, the "motor of all growth, development, and change."²¹ As Ignatius himself discovered on his sickbed, only humanity's ultimate desire can overcome all the other passions vying for its attention, or as Pierre Wolff says, "Only a passion can overcome another passion."²²

This pairs nicely with yet another central insight of Ignatian spirituality: that because God has made humanity in God's image, humanity's deepest desire (which is for God) is the same as God's desire (which is for humanity to find fulfillment in praising and serving God).²³ Though this may appear to be a rather self-serving system on God's part, the reality is that God's desires are bigger than those of humanity, pulling humanity out of itself and offering it a freedom defined by God's expanse

¹⁸ Evan B. Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), 380.

¹⁹ George E. Ganss, *Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius: A Translation and Commentary* (Saint Louis: Loyola Press, 1992), 32. Translated as "soul," Ignatius uses the word *anime*, meaning the whole self. For Ignatius, saving souls was a commitment to "develop one's whole self into the eternal life" through continual, spiritual growth. See Ganss, 28–29, 150.

²⁰ An example of this is found in *The Second Prelude* of "The First Exercise." Ignatius tells the individual practicing the exercises to ask God for what he or she wants and desires. Ignatius has the exercitant repeat this question toward the beginning of almost every exercise. See Ganss, 40.

²¹ Thomas McGrath, "The Place of Desires in the Ignatian Exercises," *The Way Supplement* 76 (Spring 1993): 27. See also Howard, 221; Margaret Silf and Gerald W. Hughes, *Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality*, 10th ed. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2007), 109.

²² Pierre Wolff, *Discernment: The Art of Choosing Well*, rev. ed. (Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 2003), 63.

²³ O'Brien, 71.

rather than humanity's limitations.²⁴ Similar to what the Jerusalem Council articulated in its proclamation, "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us," (Acts 15:28) Ignatian spirituality emphasizes that the desire of the person desiring can become identical with the desire of the one desired.²⁵

This means that desire can lead Christians to God's desire for them, offering congregations a place to begin "looking for the direction in which God might be calling [them] to do great deeds."²⁶ For congregations who find themselves aimlessly wandering, it might be helpful to ask if they have misplaced their desires. In order for congregations to respond wisely to their present situations and to God, they must, like Ignatius, diligently long for the purpose for which they exist.

Having defined humanity's purpose, the "Principle and Foundation" next states that God has created everything on earth to help humanity achieve its vocation. The challenge is to either use or free oneself from created things depending on whether they help or hinder the individual from praising and serving God. The quality necessary to differentiate between the two is indifference.

Though Christians' deepest desires may be that which God desires for them, desires in general tend to have their own agenda, sometimes becoming obsessive and controlling. The way to freedom lies in making oneself indifferent to almost everything.²⁷ This is not to say that indifference suggests a general disinterest,²⁸ only an "absence of compulsion toward one thing or another."²⁹ It is an "ability to be detached from one's initial biases."³⁰ Ignatius advised that "I should find myself in the middle, like the pointer of a balance."³¹ Such an attitude can only grow out of a deep commitment that one's "best choice is that which is more pleasing to God."³²

²⁴ Christina A. Astorga, "Ignatian Discernment: A Critical Contemporary Reading for Christian Decision Making," *Horizons* 32 1 (March 1, 2005): 95.

²⁵ McGrath, 29.

²⁶ William J. Byron and James Martin, *Jesuit Saturdays: Sharing the Ignatian Spirit with Friends and Colleagues*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), 64.

²⁷ The only exceptions Ignatius lists are factors outside the realm of free will and that which is forbidden. Ganss, 32.

²⁸ Liebert, 34; James Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 306.

²⁹ Wolff, 61.

³⁰ Martin, 306.

³¹ Ganss, 77.

³² Liebert, 33.

For anxious or afraid congregations, indifference may be “the most counterintuitive move in the leadership discernment process,”³³ and yet it is essential. As long as a congregation is ruled by its own biased or selfish desires, “it is impossible to be sure that the decision one makes is the result of free choice.”³⁴ Making matters worse, a lack of indifference results in a discernment process that is “little more than a rigged election.”³⁵ To discern well, congregations must be willing to move in any direction, to share all that God has given them, and to suffer if necessary.³⁶ Indifference frees congregations to make decisions based solely on the praise and service of God, which is their only hope of continuing into God’s desired future for them.

If Ignatian spirituality begins by naming the reason for human existence and continues by stressing the need for indifference in relation to the use of the gifts God has provided to participate in that existence, it is nourished and sustained by a healthy imagination. It was Ignatius’s daydreaming that opened his life to God’s invitation. Reason can make cold deductions, but only the imagination can holistically envision both the issue at hand and its accompanying emotions.³⁷ Only the imagination can visualize events not yet real, paving the way for creative breakthrough.³⁸

Ignatius discovered that the imagination is a traveling companion for Christians, helping them to grasp their own stories in light of the Gospel, “to make connections between what [they] are living vicariously in [their] prayer and how [they] are living in [their] incarnate reality.”³⁹ It allows practitioners to be present in the world differently, thereby enabling them to notice God’s activity in new and surprising ways. As many congregations struggle to break free from spiritual apathy, systemic dysfunction, and cultural disorientation, the creative power of the imagination can launch them down new paths of life and service.

To glorify God, to align desire with the desire of the Father, to be indifferent toward all created things, and to listen for God through one’s imagination, these are the principles that hold Ignatian spirituality together. The loss of any one affects the whole, and it is with these

³³ Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God’s Will Together* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 188.

³⁴ Wolff, 62.

³⁵ Barton, 191.

³⁶ Byron and Martin, 67.

³⁷ Liebert, 99.

³⁸ Liebert, 98.

³⁹ Silf and Hughes, 214.

principles that congregations can begin to piece together a framework for their own discernment needs.

Examen

Before beginning the first exercise, Ignatius describes a process for reflecting on the day, which he titles “A Method for Making the General Examination of Conscience.”⁴⁰ It contains five points. First, exercitants (those practicing spiritual exercises) thank God for the gifts of the day. Second, they seek to know their sin. Third, they examine their day. Fourth, they ask forgiveness for any faults, and finally, they resolve to amend any negative behavior.

Ignatius assumed that God is present everywhere in understandable ways,⁴¹ so the purpose of examen was to meet God where one really is.⁴² Through examen, individuals could begin to realize their lives were “suffused with the presence of God.”⁴³ Ignatius thought it so important that he told his followers never to omit it from their day.

Though aimed at individuals, examen can be an important part of congregational decision-making. Examen teaches congregants to look for God’s ongoing activity in the present, in their own lives, and in the lives of those around them. Examen confronts congregations with the work of the Holy Spirit in concrete human activities. Though examen does not allow congregations to ignore the role they have played in their own situations, it does highlight the places God continues to be alive in the midst of transition or loss. For congregations needing to make a decision and hoping to do so in response to God, examen can help members accept the fullest reality of their situations, providing the clarity necessary for fruitful discernment.

The Four Weeks

Marian Cowen describes *The Spiritual Exercises* as a “school of prayer.”⁴⁴ Ignatius describes them this way: “For, just as taking a walk, traveling on foot, and running are physical exercises, so is the name of spiritual exercises given to any means of preparing and disposing our soul to rid itself of all its disordered affections and then . . . of seeking and finding God’s will in the ordering of our life and the salvation of our soul.”⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Ganss, 38.

⁴¹ Martin, 82.

⁴² Silf and Hughes, 189.

⁴³ Martin, 87.

⁴⁴ Norvene Vest, *Tending the Holy: Spiritual Direction Across Traditions* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2003), 64.

⁴⁵ Ganss, 21.

Although “school of prayer” may sound rather esoteric, the purpose of *The Spiritual Exercises* for Ignatius was practical: to help individuals grow in union with God in order to make good decisions.⁴⁶

Yet Cowen is correct. *The Exercises* do teach practitioners a form of prayer. Within Ignatian spirituality, contemplation is the act of praying and engaging Scripture through imagination.⁴⁷ Originally, *The Spiritual Exercises* took place over a four-week period, each week having its own theme. Ignatius developed these themes by asking exercitants to use their imaginations to actively enter biblical texts as subjective participants. This form of prayer was not meant to be a flight of fancy but another avenue for God’s presence and guidance.⁴⁸

The first week of *The Spiritual Exercises* focuses on an individual’s sin. Though dwelling on sin may seem an overly pessimistic place to start, the goal is not to discourage exercitants. Instead, the hope is to establish a solid foundation by enabling the exercitant to appreciate him or herself as a loved sinner.⁴⁹ Though fostering a sense of humility in the exercitant is important, it is the love of God that undergirds *The Spiritual Exercises*, and it is important for those journeying through *The Spiritual Exercises* to know that loved sinners have a special worth and dignity in the eyes of God.⁵⁰

Building on this, the theme of the second week moves exercitants from self-discernment to the contemplation of Christ’s presence by focusing on the earthly life and ministry of Jesus.⁵¹ The third week of *The Spiritual Exercises*, which has exercitants imagining the Passion of Jesus, forces practitioners to realize that self-sacrifice, even death, is the door to resurrection.⁵² It also confronts exercitants with an uncomfortable challenge. If a person wants to be more like Christ, who accepted hardship, then the one wishing to follow Jesus will likely need to seek such hardship by choosing the more difficult path.⁵³

During the fourth week, anchored in the love of God, immersed in the ministry of Jesus, dead to self, and now reflecting on the resurrection of Jesus, the exercitant begins to respond to the living Lord’s invitation. The end of *The Spiritual Exercises* represents an exciting time, a time of hope and

⁴⁶ O’Brien, 14.

⁴⁷ O’Brien, 141.

⁴⁸ Howard, 384.

⁴⁹ Timothy M. Gallagher, *Discerning the Will of God: An Ignatian Guide to Christian Decision Making* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), 41.

⁵⁰ O’Brien, 36.

⁵¹ William A. Dyrness et al., eds., *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the Worldwide Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 233.

⁵² Wolff, 49–50.

⁵³ Martin, 295.

defeated despair. It is from this vista that exercitants can discern the way forward.

Applying a Basic Ignatian Framework to the Congregation

At this point, one can start to name the component parts necessary for any congregational, Ignatian discernment process. First, an Ignatian framework must have a clear understanding of why the church exists, which is to praise, revere, and serve God. If the goal of a congregation's discernment is to grow numerically, address financial woes, or to treat the symptoms of anxiety, a decision may accomplish such ends, but the congregation will not have practiced Ignatian discernment. Second, an Ignatian framework for discernment must value and foster indifference regarding the *mammon* under a congregations' stewardship. This relates to more than physical properties and financial resources. A congregation wishing to engage in Ignatian discernment faces the difficult challenge of gaining indifference toward people, ministries, leadership structures, denominational traditions, and even how it prioritizes its time. Third, Ignatian discernment must somehow renew a congregation's appreciation for the valued place of imagination in congregational life. Going hand in hand with imagination, an Ignatian process for discernment must foster a desire to search for God and to discover God in mundane and fantastic, expected and surprising places. And finally, an Ignatian framework for discernment must help discerners envision themselves as loved sinners caught up in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Though the means through which a congregation attempts to do this may vary, these ideals are central to Ignatian spirituality and need to be present in Ignatian discernment, at least in some form.

Ignatian Insights into Decision Making

In *The Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius teaches that there are three times in which one goes about making a good decision. Evan Howard calls these three times: being blasted, being led, and being ignored.⁵⁴ Due to the somewhat misleading nature of the word "ignored," it might be more helpful to use an analogy of a ship at sea. In this case, the three times would be: hurricane, competing crosswinds, and calm seas.

Ignatius describes the first time of decision-making as a time when "God . . . moves and attracts the will in such a way that a devout person,

⁵⁴ Howard, 394.

without doubting or being able to doubt, carries out what was proposed.”⁵⁵ Ignatius uses the apostles Paul and Matthew as examples. In both cases, whether on the road to Damascus or at a tax collector’s booth, Jesus’s invitation came like an undeniable force. Paul and Matthew were no more confused about how to respond than a ship is confused about which way to travel in a hurricane. One simply goes where the wind blows.

During the second time, the decision-maker finds him or herself buffeted like a ship caught by competing crosswinds. The task of the discerner is to decide which wind is blowing toward God. If this is the situation, Ignatius says that one is only ready to make a decision when “sufficient clarity and knowledge are received from the experience of consolations and desolations, and from experience in the discernment of various spirits.”⁵⁶

Ignatius defines consolation as “that which occurs when some interior motion is caused within the soul through which it comes to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord.”⁵⁷ He describes the experience of consolation as an increase in hope, faith, charity, joy, tranquility, and peace.⁵⁸ Desolation is its opposite, causing disquiet, agitation, and temptation. Desolation leaves one “completely listless, tepid, and unhappy, ... feel[ing] separated from our Creator and Lord.”⁵⁹ This is not to say that consolation is happiness and desolation is sadness. One can experience consolation as “joy despite tragic pain.”⁶⁰ It is more the case that one always experiences consolation as a drawing, and if one feels driven by fear, desperation, or anything else, it is the prompting of desolation.⁶¹ The challenge in this is the ease with which one can confuse false consolation for true consolation. To alleviate this confusion, Ignatius supplements his thoughts about consolation and desolation with multiple techniques useful for recognizing negative impulses for what they really are.

First, he says that a spirit of desolation, or “the enemy,” acts like a quarrelsome woman.⁶² Though in a twenty-first century context this sounds rather sexist, the point is that when a person boldly and unyieldingly holds one’s ground, the enemy backs down. If one caves into the enemy’s demands, however, “there is no beast on the face of the earth as fierce as

⁵⁵ Ganss, 76.

⁵⁶ Ganss, 76.

⁵⁷ Ganss, 122.

⁵⁸ Ganss, 122.

⁵⁹ Ganss, 122.

⁶⁰ Astorga, 81.

⁶¹ Silf and Hughes, 86.

⁶² Ganss, 124.

the enemy of human nature when he is pursuing his damnable intention."⁶³ Second, a spirit of desolation can act like a false lover, always wanting to keep its persuasions a secret.⁶⁴ If, after sharing one's thoughts with another, a compulsion dissipates, the Spirit of God was not its source. Third, Ignatius warns that impulses leading to or from desolation act like military commanders, always attacking weak points.⁶⁵ The only defense is to know one's own weaknesses and to be prepared when the enemy launches an attack.

Ignatius also counsels that when a person is going from good to better, the good spirit touches gently "like a drop of water going into a sponge,"⁶⁶ while the evil spirit touches sharply like water "falling onto a stone."⁶⁷ The opposite is true if a person is going from bad to worse. In that case it is the evil spirit who prods gently and the good spirit that disrupts. For individuals and communities attempting to make a decision in competing crosswinds, knowing the seas on which one sails is as important as knowing the direction of the wind.

Congregations may find Ignatius's language dated and confusing at first, but those that develop the skill of differentiating one motivation from another can save precious time by not arguing over unproductive or even damaging concerns. Budget constraints and membership complaints are real, but basing decisions on the fear or frustration such issues cause will never lead a congregation down the paths of God. Ignatius believed it was an evil spirit giving counsel during times of desolation, and as Ignatius says, "By following his counsels we can never find the way to a right decision."⁶⁸

The third and final time in which one makes a decision is during a period of relative tranquility when "the soul is not being moved one way and the other by various spirits and uses its natural faculties in freedom and peace."⁶⁹ In other words, the winds have died down and the sea is calm. It is during this third time that Ignatius provides a process for how to make what one might call a "rational" decision.

Ignatius separates decision-making during this third time into two methods. The first method entails a more intellectual approach to decision-making. It begins by clearly defining the question. Once this is done,

⁶³ Ganss, 125.

⁶⁴ Ganss, 125.

⁶⁵ Ganss, 125.

⁶⁶ Ganss, 127.

⁶⁷ Ganss, 128.

⁶⁸ Ganss, 123.

⁶⁹ Ganss, 76.

Ignatius suggests listing the advantages and disadvantages of choosing for or against the matter at hand. After listing advantages and disadvantages, it is time to reflect on all the issues involved and to note to which side one's reason is more inclined.⁷⁰

The second method for making a decision when the seas are calm involves three imaginative exercises. The first is to imagine the advice one would give an unknown person who just so happens to be in the exact same situation. Second, discerners can imagine themselves at the point of death. If that were the case, what choice would the decision-maker wish he or she had made? Finally, Ignatius encourages the one making a decision to imagine answering to Jesus for his or her life. What story does one want to tell? The advice or wished for outcomes one imagines during this second method may clarify or bolster any impression the decision-maker had after utilizing Ignatius's first method.⁷¹

Within a congregational context, there is no need to construct fixed boundaries between Ignatius's three times for making decisions. By keeping the three together, congregations can bring all their diverse experiences to bear on the decisions they must make.⁷² It may also be helpful for congregations to keep the *magis* (Latin for greater) principle in mind. Ignatius believed that all mature choices are between goods,⁷³ and as such, the *magis* principle grew out of a trust in a "divine love which seeks our coming to know the joy and fullness of a life in God and which will not settle for a lesser good for us."⁷⁴ This principle is so important to Ignatian spirituality that *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*, "for the greater glory of God," has become the Jesuits' unofficial motto.⁷⁵ The instruction Ignatius provides is really only useful if congregations are trying to decide between good and best.

Engineering a Congregational Framework for Ignatian Discernment

Having considered Ignatius's insights into decision-making, congregations can now begin to engineer a framework around the values and practices of Ignatian discernment. First, an Ignatian framework will be open to a consuming invitation from God, however rare that might be. Second, an Ignatian framework will provide a congregation with the

⁷⁰ Ganss, 77–78.

⁷¹ Ganss, 78–79.

⁷² Astorga, 98.

⁷³ Ignatius himself says, "It is necessary that all the matters about which we wish to make an election should in themselves be either indifferent or good." See Ganss, 75.

⁷⁴ Astorga, 88.

⁷⁵ Martin, 370.

opportunity to recognize the sources and directions of its own impulses. This implies a certain rootedness in God brought about by spiritual disciplines such as daily Examen and imaginative prayer. Third, an Ignatian framework will utilize Ignatian processes like defining the issue, listing advantages and disadvantages, and practicing imaginative exercises. Finally, and not mentioned until now, Ignatian discernment will seek confirmation after a decision has been made.

Ignatius concludes his discussion about the three times in which one can make healthy decisions with this note, “After I have observed the rules presented above for my salvation and eternal commitment, I shall make my election and offer it to God our Lord.”⁷⁶ Though Ignatius is an idealist, he is also a realist. No matter what framework a congregation uses, discernment does not predict the future or provide absolute certainty. Missteps are possible. New information may come to light, information that would have drastically influenced the results of discernment. Confirmation acts as a final test of approval.

Confirmation can take multiple forms. At the very least, the lack of anything calling the decision into question can confirm that the decision made was the right decision.⁷⁷ Optimistically, confirmation comes in the form of a deep feeling of harmony and tranquility, a sense that the decision made reflects “what we, both we and the Spirit, really want.”⁷⁸ Thus, a decision led by consolation results in more consolation.⁷⁹

Leaders can never assume success just because they implement change. It is only after effecting change and then “subsequently enduring the resultant sabotage”⁸⁰ that leaders can feel truly successful. If a congregation does not feel its decision has been confirmed by God, it may not be able to endure the emotional turbulence created by that decision. Making a decision is only the beginning.

Though *The Spiritual Exercises* focuses exclusively on how an individual can respond to God’s invitation, it is important to remember that for Ignatius “discernment is never done in isolation.”⁸¹ In *The Exercises*, one can see this principle in the relationship between exercitant and spiritual

⁷⁶ Ganss, 79.

⁷⁷ Martin, 320.

⁷⁸ Wolff, 115.

⁷⁹ Astorga, 96. Ignatius provides an example of such consolation in his *Spiritual Diary*. The diary notes times of consolation and desolation as Ignatius was attempting to decide if Jesuits should take a vow of complete poverty. Some of the repeating signs of consolation Ignatius experienced were a sense of greater devotion and weeping during and after Mass. See Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings*, ed. Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (New York: Penguin Classics, 1997), 73–109.

⁸⁰ Friedman et al., 247.

⁸¹ Gallagher, 82.

director, but there is an alternative source that provides a very important example of Ignatian discernment practiced in a group setting.

The Deliberation

In 1537, Ignatius and nine colleagues began preaching, sharing a life of prayer and poverty, and caring for the sick and poor in Venice. They called themselves the “Companions of Jesus.” Due to their work in Venice, Rome, and elsewhere, their reputation as dedicated servants of Christ quickly spread to the extent that, by 1539, multiple bishops requested that the pope send the Companions all throughout Europe. As Ignatius tells it, “The time was approaching for us to be scattered and parted from one another.”⁸²

In response, the Companions gathered to discuss what was to become of their small band. Ignatius recounts that almost immediately, “there was cleavage of sentiments and opinions.”⁸³ Though they agreed on their ultimate calling, they disagreed on the best way to embody that calling. At an impasse, the group made a decision: to dedicate themselves as individuals to “prayer, Masses, and meditations more fervently than usual.”⁸⁴ They also proposed specific questions for everyone to consider in between gatherings. Each night when they gathered, they shared their thoughts, based on prayer, worship, and reflection, and together they judged what was most appropriate and helpful.⁸⁵

Apparently, this two-sided approach of dedicating themselves to prayerful, worship-anchored reflection during the day and of sharing and judging helpful insights at night was enough to move the discernment process forward. Ignatius shares that with this process, the Companions were quickly able to agree that their “united spiritual strength [was] more robust and braver in any united arduous enterprise than it would be if segmented.”⁸⁶ They would become the order now known as the Jesuits. Their process also fostered in the group a feeling that God had guided the decision, or as Ignatius later reflected, “It was solely what our Lord inspired and the Apostolic See then confirmed and approved.”⁸⁷

As encouraging as this initial success was, however, the Companions now faced a second question more difficult than the first. Specifically, the

⁸² Jules Toner, “The Deliberation That Started the Jesuits,” *Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits* VI 4 (June 1974): 185. This is the only full, English translation of the text.

⁸³ Toner, 185.

⁸⁴ Toner, 186.

⁸⁵ Toner, 187.

⁸⁶ Toner, 192.

⁸⁷ Toner, 193.

Companions needed to decide if members of their order would take a vow of obedience to someone else in the group. Ignatius says that many days of prayer and discussion brought no resolution, so they started to search for better ways of discerning together.

Like before, the Companions would continue to dedicate a portion of each day to prayer, worship, and reflection, so as to have “a predilection for obeying rather than commanding, when the consequent glory of God and the praise of his majesty would be equal,”⁸⁸ which sounds remarkably similar to Ignatius’s language in the “Principle and Foundation.” They then, however, committed to not discussing the matter outside of official meetings and to imagining themselves as strangers to the group, “to prevent anyone from being persuaded by another and, therefore, biased.”⁸⁹ In other words, they would do as much as possible to maintain a state of indifference. They also dedicated themselves to a more structured approach to their gatherings. First, each Companion in turn would list all the disadvantages to obedience he had compiled during personal prayer, worship, and reflection. After that, the group would separate. At the next meeting, each Companion would share the advantages he had assembled during his spiritual disciplines. After sharing the cons and the pros, the group continued to meet, “weigh[ing] the more forceful and important reasons and [taking] time as usual for prayer, meditation, and reflection.”⁹⁰

This more structured discernment process helped the group arrive at a decision. They would take a vow of obedience to another member of the group. What seems to have surprised Ignatius is not that the group was able to come to a conclusion, but that the group came to a decision “without a single dissenting voice.”⁹¹ Though a majority vote would have sufficed, consensus only confirmed the group’s decision.

Ignatius concludes his recollection of events by saying, “In all our deliberations over the questions just spoken of and others, we followed the order of discussion and procedure described above, always giving attention to both sides of every question.”⁹² In all, their efforts lasted three months, resulting “in a spirit of gladness and harmony.”⁹³ Though they would later

⁸⁸ Toner, 197.

⁸⁹ Toner, 198.

⁹⁰ Toner, 205. It is easy to see the influence of *The Spiritual Exercises* in the group’s discernment, which would have been written down in some form by this point in Ignatius’s development. Though *The Spiritual Exercises* technically tells exercitants to list the advantages before the disadvantages, the reasoning for the lists is the same. See Ganss, 77–78.

⁹¹ Toner, 205.

⁹² Toner, 208.

⁹³ Toner, 208.

meet political opposition, and their order still needed the pope's official approval, the Companions' application of Ignatian spirituality and discernment to their community birthed one of the most influential religious orders in all of Christian history.

In *The Deliberation*, congregations find a clear, two-sided framework for congregational discernment. To one side, those practicing discernment settle themselves through prayer, worship, and personal reflection. It is likely safe to assume that the Companions used similar forms of prayer and reflection as those shared in *The Exercises* and later taught by the Society of Jesus. On the other side, Ignatian discernment commits itself to logically and objectively listing reasons against and for the matter under discernment, evaluating the amassed data, weighing the importance of the issues raised, and working toward a sense of consensus. After navigating the complex themes and ideas found in *The Exercises*, the framework found in *The Deliberation* is surprisingly simple and straightforward. It is practical. It is Spirit-led. It is action-oriented, and it is learnable for congregations.

The Power of Ignatian Discernment

For congregations unsure of where God would have them go, the phrase "God's will" can be misleading. It implies that what God would have his people do is somewhere "out there" in need of discovery, but what Ignatius teaches congregations is that God's will is discovered in the "open, relational, and non-predetermined nature of God's relationship with us."⁹⁴ Ignatian discernment becomes a journey through which congregations discover that they have not only been searching for God, God has been searching for them, meeting them in a "rendezvous at the core of [their] being."⁹⁵

Because the Ignatian gaze looks toward the hope of a transformed life in the present and not merely at the eschaton, Ignatius helps congregations dream of a better world "in which grace and truth, freedom and peace, are verified not only in human hearts and relationships, but in structures, institutions, and the whole climate of human existence."⁹⁶ It witnesses to the hope that "our most particular and personal decisions are within the orbit of God's personal love and providence."⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Liebert, 31.

⁹⁵ Wolff, 119.

⁹⁶ Thomas Clarke, S.J., "Ignatian Spirituality and Societal Consciousness," *Studies in the Spirituality of the Jesuits* 7 (September 1975): 139.

⁹⁷ Astorga, 96.

Far too many congregations find themselves in a state of desolation: listless, tepid, unhappy, and feeling separated from God. This affects their members, their ministries, and their ministers. But with Ignatius at their side, it is possible to confront the complex and multifaceted challenges they face. Members can begin to communicate and share their thoughts, concerns, and ideas. People divided by disagreement and conflict can remember that they serve the same living Lord and strive to accomplish a common task together. Churches can respond to the drawing invitation of God with full confidence that nothing, not even their own structural and institutional failings, can separate them from the love of God. The winds of consolation can blow again, filling sails, and congregations can ride those winds to a world in which the will of the Father is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Conclusion

What is discernment? It is not simply communication, either with God or others. It is not simply prayer. It is not simply making a decision. Though discernment incorporates all these practices, it is ultimately a place of theosis. It is a place where congregations who feel torn apart, overwhelmed, and unprepared can learn how to dance with God. As it has been since the church's birth, discernment is a way for Christians to respond to their ambiguous, confusing, and sometimes frightening encounters with the Creator of All.⁹⁸ This is what it was for Ignatius. This is what it can be for struggling congregations in this modern, *zerrissenheit* era.

Ignatius can act as a prophet from ages past, reminding today's congregations of their purpose, their priorities, and the power of their deepest passions. He can open a congregation's eyes to the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural forces that draw them toward or push them from the one for whom they exist to serve. He can remind congregations of the gift of their imaginations, offering them the opportunity to dream the dreams of God and equipping them with a framework to decide how to embody those dreams in contextually sensitive ways. This does not happen in the blink of an eye. It is a formative process, a learning experience, and a developed virtue, but in the end, it is very much pertinent to congregations who long to anchor their choices in the movement of the Holy Spirit and the ongoing invitation of God.

⁹⁸ See Howard, 373–74. Also Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 28.

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