

"It has been decided by the Holy Spirit and by ourselves". (Acts 15:28,28, JB¹)

This is how it was put in a letter from the apostles and elders in Jerusalem to settle a controversy at Antioch. This biblical statement affirms the remarkable reality that our decisions can be made conjointly with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit has been given to us as a gift (Acts 15:8,9, JB). Our belief that we can rely on the Spirit's guidance in making life choices grounds the Christian practice of discernment.

Discernment can refer to both a posture and a process. As a spiritual posture, discernment entails fostering a contemplative attitude that helps spot the presence of God in the concrete events and experiences of ordinary life. To live with a "discerning heart is to believe that "earth's crammed with heaven" and that God is to be found everywhere in the holy ground of our existence. As a process, discernment is decision making that invites God into the process and relies on God to be the telling influence in the choices we make. It is a deliberate attempt to become attuned to the guidance of God in important life choices. The goal of discernment is to refine the acoustics of the heart so that we can be more closely united to God in obedient faith. In short, discernment is the movement from absurdity (from the Latin *surdus*, meaning "deaf") to obedience (from the Latin *obedire*, meaning "to listen to" or "obey," from *ob* [to] and *audire* [hear]).

HOLISTIC DISCERNMENT

The word holistic (from the Greek *holus*) means "total" or "whole." In the Gospel of Mark (12:44, JB), Jesus commends the widow for putting into the collection basket "everything she had to support her life" (*holon ton bion*). Holistic discernment encourages us to put our whole selves into the process of seeking God's guidance. It stems from the belief that the human person is a temple of the Holy Spirit. God's voice can be heard deep within. To recognize that inner voice—as it registers in our thoughts and feelings, bodily reactions and moods, imagination and dreams—is a reliable way of discerning the Holy Spirit's lead. A holistic approach insists that God is found everywhere and that attention to the divine must be wide-ranging and inclusive.

The story of the three magi (Matthew 2:1–12) illustrates how God's guidance can come in a variety of forms. The three spiritual seekers experienced God's presence in their hearts' desire to set off from home in search, in their companionship and shared wisdom along the way, in a star that kept them on track, and in a dream that warned

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them not to return home by way of Herod's territory. Like the magi, contemporary Christians are increasingly embracing an image of God who is present in every nook and cranny of creation. The whole world is the vocabulary of God, and all reality can communicate divine guidance. Holistic discernment reflects this growing faith in a God of surprises who speaks to us through Scripture, church teachings, other people, and external events, as well as in the silence of our hearts.

To discern holistically entails valuing both inner and outer authority. On the one hand, external authority consists in respecting time-honored traditions and the accumulated wisdom of the faith community. The teachings of tradition and the viewpoints of others in the community are important aspects of discernment because God's guidance can often be embodied in them. Of course, even tradition must be examined critically, with what theologians call a "hermeneutic of suspicion" because the community, too, has made errors in the past from which much can be learned. Dialoguing with others about their faith and values provides a healthy check on our internal process and a chance for feedback and helps ensure that we do not slide off the slippery slope of self-deception.

Inner authority, on the other hand, entails trusting our experience of God as we monitor our thoughts and fantasies, emotions and desires. Discernment falters if we do not pay serious attention to our inner life and honor our inner authority. A holistic approach to discernment takes seriously the knowledge-bearing capacity not only of the mind,

but also of the body, emotions, senses, and imagination. It calls for honoring the psychosomatic or body-spirit unity of the person and recognizes that bodily expressions and symptoms often reveal interior states that can indicate how God may be drawing us when making a choice. Thus, holistic discernment sees the significance of thoughts and fears, fantasies and feelings, dreams and drives, bodily sensations and intuitions and views them as possible sources of divine guidance. Like a personal compass, our inner life contains vital information essential for discerning the Spirit's lead. Discernment requires cultivating a quiet inner center, a receptive space where we can tune in to our inner voices and the voice of God. Taking seriously our inner life as an important source of God's guidance is a particular challenge for those of us who have been conditioned to distrust personal experience and inner wisdom and to believe that the truth, "the right answer," and "God's will" are more likely found in some external source. This prejudice against the inner workings of the Spirit leads easily to a betrayal of the self, the intimate dwelling place of God.

As a practical way of deepening an awareness of God's voice speaking within, it is helpful to imagine an inner wisdom circle in which a meeting of the various parts of the self is taking place. Within this inner dialogue or conversation among the various aspects of the self, it is important that each part of the plural self feels it has had its say and has been understood. It is also important that no one part monopolize the discussion and try to force its way on the self. In a culture that worships reason and the scientific, objective mind, for example, it is critical to remember that, in the words of psychologist Carl Rogers, people are wiser than their intellects. When we face a decision, we might ask ourselves, "Are all the legitimate A holistic approach to discernment takes seriously the knowledge-bearing capacity not only of the mind, but also of the body, emotions, senses, and imagination. 40 I representatives of the self given a fair say in the deliberations?" For example, are our feelings taken into account? Or do we say to ourselves, "Let's be objective, stick to the facts, and keep feelings out of this"?

Happily, women's liberation has also liberated men. When feelings and hunches were denigrated as merely "women's intuition" and not a solid basis for making decisions, everyone lost a potentially important resource. Ignoring feelings simply pushes them underground to operate outside of reasonable control, undermining the decisions in which they were given no say. At the opposite extreme, we need to ask ourselves whether or not we allow our feelings to drown out the other voices in that inner wisdom circle. Either case—refusing to give feelings their say or letting feelings dominate — makes for poor discernment. The proper function of reflection is not the suppression of spontaneity, wants, and feelings but the liberation of wants and feelings from their

fascination with fragments, to let them be reactions to more than the immediate.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the sixteenth-century author of the classic *The Spiritual Exercises*, provides an example of heeding inner wisdom when he suggests imagining a person coming to us for help in making a choice, a choice similar to one we may face. According to Ignatius, we should listen carefully to what we counsel the person to do and then follow our own advice. ² This Ignatian exercise contains a twofold value: it increases clarity through objectification (telling our own story in the third person), and it encourages us to honor our inner authority.

IGNATIUS DISCERNMENT

Ignatius' approach to discerning life choices can be considered an early form of holistic decision making because his guidelines for what he terms "making an election" emphasize the integration of thought, affectivity, imagination, and sensation. He uses the term *sentir*, or felt knowledge, to indicate a mode of knowing that combines reason and emotion. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, he describes three times or ways in which God can guide people faced with choice. These three ways integrate reason, affect (emotion), and religious experience.

THE WAY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The first time occurs when God "so moves and attracts the will that a devout soul without hesitation, or the possibility of hesitation, follows what has been manifested to it." ³ Ignatius cites the responses of Saint Paul and Saint Matthew to Christ's call in order to illustrate this first time of election. Phenomenologically, this first time can be viewed as a moment of peak religious experience, a time when individuals feel overwhelmed by an inner sense of certainty about their decisions. At such moments, they may experience something deep within click into place, providing an intuitive sense of how they must proceed. Or they may perceive such a total congruence between the sense of internal "requiredness" (what they feel they must do) and God's will (what they think God wants of them) that the course to be followed is unambiguously clear. Quite apart from any deliberation, this personal "moment of truth" can spring suddenly upon the person without any antecedent cause, like a forceful flash of insight, removing any further need for deciding.

THE WAY OF AFFECTIVITY

The second time of decision making suggested by Ignatius emphasizes the knowledgebearing capacity of feelings. It occurs when individuals must rely on their affective states of consolation or desolation to detect the influence of God regarding the decision to be made. ⁴ In the case of people progressing earnestly along the spiritual path, Ignatius understands consolation as a complexus of positive feelings that encourages, supports, and confirms a prospective decision as

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being "right." He sees desolation as a complexus of negative feelings that discourages, questions, and calls into doubt a prospective decision, suggesting that it is not "right." The assumption underlying this second time of election is that emotions can be indicators of God's guidance. According to Ignatius, "In souls that are progressing to greater perfection, the action of the good angel is delicate, gentle, delightful. It may be compared to a drop of water penetrating a sponge. The action of the evil spirit upon such souls is violent, noisy and disturbing. It may be compared to a drop of water falling upon a stone."⁵ In short, Ignatian spirituality asserts the importance of feelings by connecting our emotional awareness with our ability to decipher how we are being moved by God. Ignatius recognized that human experiences of joy and desolation, of light and darkness, are not mere human emotions that vary like the wind in a storm, but are the means by which we recognize the movements within our spirit stirred by the Holy Spirit.

THE WAY OF RATIONALITY

The third time of decision making highlights the process of reasoning.⁶ If the person pictures him- or herself on a deathbed and recalls the purpose of existence (that is, to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to be united with God forever), he or she is asked to list the pros and cons of various options.⁷ This third time presupposes that God's guiding influence can be felt in the process of reasoning. Like the values-clarification exercise that asks people what they would do if they had only a week to live, this Ignatian method relies on the truth that can come at death's door to provide a perspective for present choices. In other words, it asks people to anticipate which decision they would most likely be able to ratify when facing death.

The genius of Ignatius was not that he counted trans personal influences or the attractions of affectivity or the process of thinking as critical factors in securing the guidance of God. Others also shared this inclusive view.⁸ Unique, however, was Ignatius' explanation of the dynamics of these three, often interrelating factors within a person's religious experience. "What Ignatius provided," maintains theologian Michael J. Buckley, "was a structure within which each of these finds a significant place; none is dismissed out of hand. A coordination among them is established so that they reach an integrity of effect and one is taught how to recognize and reply to each."⁹

THE COORDINATION OF HEART AND HEAD

The phrase "integrity of effect" aptly describes the desired outcome of Ignatian discernment. Presuming the person is genuinely committed to doing the will of God and is free from inordinate attachments that destroy freedom, the decision is integral if it emanates from an integration of feelings and thoughts. Ignatius sought this integration by building into the second and third times of decision making a complementary dynamic. He directs the person who makes a decision based on the rational approach of the third time to seek affective confirmation by prayerfully attending to his or her feelings as suggested by the second time of election. In other words, following a decision, the person should stay in close touch with the feelings that arise as a result of the decision and determine whether they confirm the rightness of the choice or cast doubt on it. After a period of testing, if positive feelings (e.g., peace, joy, hope, confidence) dominate, it is clear that affectivity has joined with intelligence to produce a harmonious effect.

However, if negative and disturbing feelings (e.g., doubt, fear, anxiety, discouragement) persist, then a closure would seem premature, and the person should continue the process until an inner harmony is produced. Ignatius recognized that human experiences of joy and desolation, of light and darkness, are not mere human emotions that vary like the wind in a storm, but are the means by which we recognize the movements within our spirit stirred by the Holy Spirit.⁴² through the alliance of thoughts and feelings.

Conversely, a person who makes a decision based on the affective approach of the second time should also seek rational confirmation through a method of the third time. William Peters, in his commentary on The Spiritual Exercises, cites the Directory of 1599⁹ to substantiate this point. He notes that Juan de Polanco, a close friend of Ignatius, called the second time of election "more excellent" than the third, but adds that it might be wise to check the result of an election made in this time by one of the methods of the third."¹⁰

Clearly the second time of decision making, based on affectivity, and the third time, based on reasoning, were designed by Ignatius to function in a complementary dynamic.

The Ignatian process seeks to ground life choices on felt knowledge, not on theoretical abstractions. This process, according to Ignatian scholar John Futrell, involves paying attention simultaneously to "the continuity of thoughts during reflection, the concomitant feelings constantly reacting to these thoughts — feelings which confirm or call into question the orientation of the reflection—and the growing understanding which involves both the thoughts and feelings— felt knowledge."¹¹

SPIRIT-LED IN MANY WAYS

Three key assumptions underlie a holistic approach to discernment: 1) God is illimitable mystery, 2) discernment is personal and idiosyncratic (not formulaic), and 3) discernment is a process of experiential learning in which we discover the ways of the Spirit in our lives over time. Because it is a human process, discernment can involve divine illumination as well as self-deception. A brief elaboration of these assumptions may be helpful.

First, because God is mystery, a holistic approach to discernment argues for the need to be open to the diverse ways our lives can be influenced by the Holy Spirit. In their clandestine rendezvous at night, Jesus tells Nicodemus the Pharisee that the Spirit is like the mysterious wind that "blows wherever it chooses" (John 3:7, JB). We cannot create the wind; we cannot control the wind. As seekers of the Spirit's guidance, all we can do is position the sails of our lives in such a way that when the mysterious Spirit sweeps into our lives, we can receive its wind and allow our lives to be powered by grace. In this sense, discernment is a spiritual discipline that connects us with the Spirit and, as such, requires conscious and focused effort.

Discernment is both an art and a gift. It is an art because we can, with practice, develop our ability to be more and more sensitive to the Spirit's movements in the whirl of our lives. Yet, ultimately, it is a gift because to be aware of and moved by God's presence depends totally on grace. Human effort alone cannot make it happen. All prayer is paradoxical in this way. Our efforts and dispositions are important, yet when we experience the mysterious movement of God in prayer, we know that it is not of our own doing; rather, grace has come upon us. Knowing this can help us to be earnest yet relaxed in our efforts. We simply try our best and trust in God to do the rest. In the process of discernment we attempt to be as wide open and undefended as possible so that we will be sensitive to the slightest nudging of the divine breeze when the mysterious wind of the Spirit blows.

Second, God's mysterious guidance comes to us in personal and unique ways that must be honored by both others and ourselves. We must each value our religious history and recognize both the pattern of grace and the pattern of temptation in our lives. In other words, we need to be aware of the idiosyncratic ways in which we are influenced and led by the Spirit, as well as the personal ways we are susceptible to being deceived and misled. We must also respect the unique ways by which God leads various individuals. In other words, we must watch for the error of thinking of discernment as a monolithic process, uniform for all persons. Based on an extensive survey of the discernment practices of a broad range of believers of various faith traditions, Nancy Reeves, psychotherapist and spiritual director, calls for "a wider vision" of how people experience God.¹²

Finally, like any other human process, discernment is fallible. Mistakes and blind spots can fl aw the process. Discernment requires a humble willingness to learn through trial and error. Proclaiming the constant availability of God's mercy and forgiving love, Jesus' parable of the prodigal son reveals that God allows for trial-and-error learning. The parable makes clear that part of the good news announced by Jesus is that we are blessed to live in a multiple-chance universe. Initial failures do not prevent us from following a path that leads to God. Speaking about himself in the third person, Ignatius, viewed by many as a master of discernment, is often quoted as saying, "This pilgrim learned how not to make mistakes by making many." Discernment, therefore, requires patient and honest self-knowledge.

Jesuit William Barry wisely states that "discernment requires that I believe that God will show himself [sic] in my experience and that I yet be wary of mindless credulity toward that same experience."

¹³ In the end, discernment is based on "two equally difficult and seemingly incompatible attitudes: to trust myself and my reactions and to recognize how easily I can delude myself."¹⁴ The process does not end with making a choice, but must be followed up with a process of confirmation. Ultimately, a decision must find its existential validation in a lived reality that is marked by "the fruit of the Spirit . . . love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22,23, JB).

ENDNOTES

- ^{01.} See Scriptural quotations marked (JB) are from The Jerusalem Bible, © 1966, 1967, and 1968 by Darton, Longman & Todd, Ltd., and Doubleday, a division of Random House, Inc. All rights reserved.
- ^{02.} Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*. Translated by Louis J. Puhl. Chicago: Loyola Press, 1951, 185.
- ^{03.} *Ibid.*, 175.
- ^{04.} *Ibid.*, 176.
- ^{05.} *Ibid.*, 335.
- ^{06.} *Ibid.*, 177-87.
- ^{07.} *Ibid.*, 186.
- ^{08.} Michael J. Buckley, "Rules for the Discernment of Spirits." *The Way Supplement* 20, Autumn 1973, 25, 26.
- ^{09.} *Ibid.*, 26.
- ^{10.} William Peters, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: Exposition and Interpretation*. Jersey City, N.J. The Program to Adapt the Spiritual Exercises, 1967, 127.
- ^{11.} John Futrell, "Ignatian Discernment." *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* II:2, April 1970, 57.
- ^{12.} Nancy Reeves, *I'd Say Yes, God, If I Knew What You Wanted*. Kelowna, British Columbia: Northstone Publishing, 2001.
- ^{13.} William Barry, "Toward a Theology of Discernment." *The Way Supplement* 64, Spring 1989, 136.
- ^{14.} *Ibid.*

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