

# MAKING LIFE-DECISIONS ACCORDING TO THE IGNATIAN METHOD OF DISCERNMENT (CRITERIA)

A young woman - very often nowadays not quite young - wants to join a religious congregation. She would need to consider for example the following: is she going to take simple or solemn vows? What will her reaction be during a period of crisis when making a life-long commitment to religious life? From the perspective of the spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola (1491 - 1556) i.e. his method of discernment, some criteria are suggested here for such and similar questions concerning vital life-decisions. There are first of all questions of when and under which circumstances can a decision be meaningful and which are the criteria concerning the choice to be made. Finally we shall explore the possibility of reversing the decision of a choice made years earlier. Some examples and their practical consequences help clarify the matter.

1. Principles for Making a Life-Decision (Discernment) A person needs to know when and under which circumstances a responsible and vital decision can be made from a "spiritual" point of view. Some basic, important theological considerations might be helpful.

**LIFE-LONG COMMITMENT.** In today's western society many people want to be independent, keep all doors open for eventual choices. They are afraid to risk or make a final decision. The person who does take this step, commits

him/herself to people, communities, institutions, to a definite life-style. In this way ideals, wishes, longings are realised, are given a *definite*, limited form or structure. The choice of a definite Christian way of life includes always the commitment to, to spend one's life for or with others; this is so even in an all together "worldly/secular" *profession*, whereby the word "worldly" holds a hidden spiritual meaning - the desire to do or create something good either for oneself or for others in this world. The realisation of ideals imitates in an analogous way the incarnation of Jesus Christ - God committed himself to this world in and through Jesus and as 'word become man' to others. He remained faithful to this commitment, also when he experienced resistance, even unto death. A person who decides on a binding Christian way of life commits him/herself always to the disciple-ship of Jesus. This person enters a way of life to which God has promised fullness and peace, but not one without difficulties. The reason for this fulfilment lies in the fact, that the kingdom of God will always be a concrete, physical community. The possible difficulties met with by the commitment to *humans/people* is not only caused by one's own broken-ness and sinfulness but also by the halfheartedness of others. The person who wants to avoid these difficulties or shirks any commitment might live a more quiet life with less conflicts but he/she misses the chance to grow and mature into a fully human person, to the full stature of Christ who suffered and rose from the dead (Eph. 4,13).

YES TO THE FRAGMENT. The person who binds himself, chooses *one thing*, but not the *other*. Because life is full of possibilities and the human person is directed towards this fullness, finally towards the infinite fullness of God, every choice includes at the same time the renunciation of precious chances. This is a very painful experience, but one can only choose part of all that is possible, *a fragment of the fullness of life*. The person is asked to say a free and convinced yes to the fragmentary character of making choices including

one's own life - otherwise one will always hanker after the other not realised opportunities.

The choice a person makes is usually seen as insignificant and modest. But the choice, when really well "relished" (Sp. Ex. 2) may already appear as the longed for fullness, because it is a deeper penetration into the fullness of *creation*. The chosen good becomes a symbol which points towards the promised fullness and what this signifies. In this way one can speak of the sacramental structure of a decision made for life. In that fragment there is already the design of the whole, in the small detail lies already the active participation and promise of the divine whole. Marital love becomes the image of divine love, a successful community a faint idea of the heavenly community, the effective professional or honorary engagement an active contribution towards the kingdom of God... - all of this appears like a tender light in the remaining uncertainty and brokenness of any earthly existence.

-/effective Maturity. To make an independent successful spiritual life-decision a person needs a certain degree of psychological health and affective maturity. Some main points would be: no serious psychological disorder, ability to grow psychologically in an all-embracing life-design, cognition and appreciation of one's own strength and weaknesses, possibilities and limits, a goal-oriented basic order and structure of daily life; inner freedom, ability to renounce the satisfaction of fulfilling all needs, ability to foster good relationships within the necessary limits, knowing and recognising roles and authority...

It is a question of the right measure, because a perfect personal, affective-cognitive maturity is impossible in this earthly life. It is always a matter of facing a decision-making process with the maturity and also with the shortcomings of a person at the time, trusting that these deficits will be "integrated" by growing towards greater maturity once the decision is made. Good counselling and accompaniment are an essential help for a successful life-decision.

INDIFFERENCE. To make a good choice for one's way of life a certain degree of what the Ignatian tradition called "indifference" or inner freedom is needed. It is only the real *free person* who can choose "indifference,"

meaning "freedom," i.e. not being restricted *by* disorderly needs, preferences, fixations and prejudices. But it also means to be open *for* the new, for uncertainties, for challenges... A person should be free to listen to the demands of the present situation and the concrete task given by God. To gain this freedom is a life-long task by the regular and continuous practice of letting go.

A person is "indifferent" when there are alternative choices when making a life-decision. Basically, there is only *one* possibility which is realistic, because all other choices are out of question - e.g. a person asking to be admitted to a religious order, having failed his/her secular career, is not really free. In this case it would be wise, to look at other choices, to unfold them positively, appreciate their value in such a way as considering them as really possible choices. Only then is a person's choice a real free one and, the pain of letting go such a possibility teaches a person to value the final choice more deeply - and most probably will remain faithful to it.

NOTICING THE "MOVEMENTS." "Movements" (*mociones* - *Sp. Ex.* 313), according to Ignatius inner emotions, are of a very different nature and arise quite spontaneously, i.e. feelings and thoughts, likes and dislikes towards intentions, things, persons, institutions. It is quite an art to notice these inner movements which need to be fostered and unfolded, also the ability of self-perception and - reflection is needed, not in an analytical or evaluating manner, but with a matter-of-fact perception and the ability to articulate the inner movements, naming them. This is very important for spiritual direction. It is not a matter of extraordinary intelligence or linguistic achievement, but simply the perception of one's inner movements and being able to articulate them. The movements felt are the "material" by which discernment takes place. Why did Ignatius observe the movements in a person to the smallest detail? Because one can meet God in no other way than through and in the things which people usually experience, feel and sense. Since the spirit of contradiction is also at work in our inner movements, one needs to "distinguish" between the various feelings or movements. The Ignatian "Rules for Discernment of Spirits" are meant to be of help.

Most important are the movements which arise during prayer, especially those of consolation and desolation (*5J5. Ex.* 316, 317). They reflect both the

good and also the evil spirit, especially during periods of consolation and also desolation. It is the central task of discernment to notice which feelings, moods and thoughts can be trusted coming from the good spirit. The following criteria shall show which of them are of special importance when making life-decisions.

## 2. Criteria for Life-Decisions in Discernment

"Discernment" is not to be mixed up with mere cognitive-intellectual or mere feeling or emotional discernment and neither with a psychological one in the sense of diagnose. These types of discernment, cognitive, emotional, psychological are all justified and have when applied correctly and at the right place their undeniable value. But they need to be grouped around what is meant and aimed at by Ignatian discernment.

"Criteria" are distinguishing marks, which should give clues for the "correctness" of a matter. They can vary ranging from content to formality. But they may not be used mechanically or rigidly but with feeling and perception according to the situation.

**THE CHOICE PROMISES CONSOLATION.** "Consolation" is according to Ignatius, "any interior movement aroused in the soul, by which it is inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord, and as a consequence, can love no creature on the face of the earth for its own sake, but only in the Creator of them all..." (Sp. Ex. 316). Likewise, Ignatius calls "consolation" when one sheds tears that move to love God, whether it is because of sorrow for one's own or other sins, one's own or other people's suffering, or for any other reason that fills the soul with peace and quiet in its Creator. Spiritual consolation is finally "every increase of faith, hope and love..."

In a modern and biblical manner one could describe "consolation" as fullness of life; also as being-in-relationship with oneself, with others and with God or as inner contentment, in harmony with oneself. Pain and disappointment also belong to consolation when an inner process of purification, of healing accompany a person's "greater" surrender. Genuine consolation is carried by faith in a God whom one meets in creation and in his work of salvation, carried by hope in the God who faithfully accompanies man's and

creation's conversion in a long and painful process; by love of God who gave us through the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ a definite direction. He who makes a life-decision needs to examine every possible alternative and the movements that spring from consolation. The person can make him/herself a concrete picture of every possible choice with a view of possible consequences for the years or decades to come. On such an imaginary journey a person should perceive which "emotions" arise, whether one is attracted, feels joy, deep contentment and confidence - simply "consolation" and show it to God in prayer. If the project promises genuine spiritual consolation - also on a long-term basis! -, it will be a good decision. If the consolation seems to be only a flash in the pan, precaution is recommended. Spiritual consolation creates normally a quiet but deep sustained feeling, is unspectacular, simple but realistic.

Consolation is the touchstone in making a life-decision, testing whether the choice gets him/her on in life. The criterion of consolation is actually very-subjective, almost an egotistic one. The discerning person aims at a gain for *him/herself*, is seeking a task or job and a life-style which brings lasting fulfilment. The moral legitimacy of this criterion might astonish, but is without doubt also Christian and biblical: "Love your neighbour *as yourself*." Only the person who, on the whole is in harmony with him/herself can be fruitful for others.

THE DECISION PROMISES TO BEAR FRUIT. The second criterion, important in content, is the one of bearing "fruit." With reference to the New-Testament Kingdom-of-God theology it means everything which contributes towards a person's growth in justice and peace, or by which he obtains faith, hope and love. Only persons who remain connected with Christ can bear spiritual fruit (Jn 15). Only through this relationship a person becomes an instrument in the hand of God not promising cheap effects but lasting fruit. The actions of a person who is connected with Christ are determined by his/her values, strength, mercy and love.

The person who needs to make a life-decision should test his/her alternative choices with regard to the possible fruit he could expect. Which fruit meets the requirements of the gospel, is genuine, wholesome and lasting? Also in this case it is not just a flash in the pan, but a sober and

concrete comparing of the pros and cons with a view of the near and far future. The question concerning fruit means testing one's decision whether it bears also fruit for *others*. The criterion is in this sense objective and altruistic. The discerning person wants to gain something *good for others*. The moral legitimacy and even commitment is obvious. In a biblical way one only needs to refer to the commandment of love of neighbour.

The two criteria, consolation and fruit do not compete with each other when they are complementary or grow evenly in proportion. Whatever contributes towards "my" spiritual consolation and growth will also help the "other persons" or vice versa. The commandment "love your neighbour - *as yourself*" expresses this parallelism. In former religious pedagogy there was the one-sided stress on fruit — one always had to be there for the others, sacrifice oneself for them - in our today's culture we often fall into the other extreme - one sees only one's own consolation and advantage and forgets one's neighbour. To find the golden mean - the Ignatian *tantum — quantum* - is our task and challenge.

"Magis" -THE GREATER CHALLENGE AND DEDICATION. When faced with several good alternatives the most important criterion is the *magis for Ignatius*. Which choice lets me expect *more* consolation and fruit? Which is the *greater* challenge, which possibility demands *more* commitment and sacrifice? The *magis* does not mean no ascetic or apostolic perfectionism and cannot be judged by a measurable success. It is rather to be interpreted christologically i.e. that which corresponds with the life and teaching of Christ, that which according to the example of Christ expresses deeper love and mercy, gives greater witness and shows more genuine truth, practices greater poverty and dedication.

In a number of cases the *magis* is misunderstood and needs to be explained. For good discernment or in order to make a good choice one needs to have alternatives and the freedom of choice. Otherwise one wants

*to push ahead only* with one's own personal projects. Other people are also entitled to theirs. And at times *less* is more. The *magis* supports a connection between activity and passivity, the attitude of *contemplatiuus in actione*, in one's own activity - it might sound a paradox - one allows God to act *all the more!* The discernment of *mociones* is in this sense a very sober and demanding way to a greater friendship and service of "Our Creator and Lord".

LIFE-DECISION AS A COMMUNICATIVE EVENT. A good decision happens through communication; with one's own interior, one's fellowmen, with God. Of particular importance is the communication with our fellowmen. The person who discusses openly his choice with counsellors, directors, friends will, as a rule objectify his choice, deepen his discernment. But one needs to distinguish on the one hand counselling with asymmetrical connections, i.e. persons in authority or professional, competent people and on the other hand the exchange with symmetrical connections, i.e. with friends. There are pros and cons for both options, both can help to gain clarity in essential issues. But the counselling person cannot make decisions for the person who seeks advice. He can only help by questioning, checking, pointing out and looking more deeply at certain aspects; by pointing out some aspects which might still be confused, issues which might need healing. The person seeking advice is reminded of values and goals thus reaching a clearer decision.

In order to draw a soul towards evil the "enemy" uses the tactics of secrecy (Sp. Ex. 326). He persuades the just soul, to keep all projects secret from anybody. In this manner the enemy helps the soul to suppress its bad conscience or personal insecurity, and seduces it through preconceived facts to think that the made choice is considered senseless or even harmful by other people.

Life-decisions should be mediated in a communicative and agreeable manner. It needs the right balance between the wise counselling of others - without being influenced or manipulated - and once *own* decision made in the silence of one's heart.

Consideration is needed for one's own person but also for the challenges made by men and God, and to have the right relationship with them. Prayer, conversation with God will help to deepen the process of discernment and perceive more comprehensively that which is one's own with the eyes of



God. Sometimes one receives little or more *lumina* — divine inspiration, which leaves one, so elderly religious say-, with a consoling clarity.

MOURNING A DISMISSED CHOICE. Life-decision is a Yes to the *one* choice and a No to the *other*. In most cases is the *Others*, good worth striving for. God's creation in all its variety and greatness offers so many possibilities - but we have only *one* life. The renunciation of the *other is* painful and needs to be mourned in one's heart. It is only through genuine mourning that one becomes free and so is able to turn one's undivided attention to the made choice in order to enjoy it and make it fruitful. Because many people cannot let go and want to keep as many irons as possible in the fire they delay life-decisions and miss important steps towards maturity.

Mourning can be helped through the exercise of the imagination. They should imagine as concrete as possible their dismissed choice, looking at its value and with love. The person will feel and suffer the pain of letting go, but will only be the case if the alternative choice promises spiritual consolation and fruit. Every life-decision is accompanied by a certain measure of grief throughout one's life, but it can be transformed into consoled grief.

TO BEAR A CROSS? Is the cross a criterion for a life-decision in the sense that one should direct one's gaze more towards the crucified, towards renunciation and pain? This question was often answered in the affirmative in the history of spirituality. The Ignatian tradition also used to stress "love of the cross", which was to be the best attitude for a good choice. A person should strive at the low and humble, "sacrifice" himself, "mortify" himself and his wishes, etc. But an exact analysis of the spiritual exercises shows, that the texts do not mention as choice the cross. Criteria are exclusively the "positive" criteria of consolation and fruit. Only for the sake of the *Good* — the bible speaks of the Kingdom of God - do the disciples follow Jesus. One should "only" be prepared to bear the cross, *if* it is God's will. The difference between these two attitudes seems to be small, but important. When making

life-decisions one does not seek suffering and renunciation, but one *bears* with them when they come - as happens in every one's life. On the mount of Olives Jesus did not wish the cross, on the contrary, he begged the Father, to let the "chalice" pass, but he added: "Not my will but yours be done".

When is it right and necessary to bear a cross, "resulting from circumstances"? The criterion again, it might sound paradoxical, will be *the fruit*. A cross, expected to be present when following Jesus, and accepted in faith, hope and love, suffered with fidelity and trust will unfold a purifying and healing strength. The best example is the cross of Christ. A cross which "only" paralyses, tortures and kills is not beneficial but destructive, and a person will fight against it or avoid it.

### 3. Revision of Earlier Life-Decisions

Ignatius is very strict on this point. When a person has really made a life-decision one should stick to it even when after some time one has the impression to have made a bad one ("without due order"). One should lead "a good life" in this chosen way though it might not be a "calling from God" (6/5. Ex. 172). This clear and severe attitude is not possible when life-decisions lead to unbearable situations, making a further stay unreasonable and inhuman. Are there criteria for crises-situations which help clarify whether and when a life-decision may or must be revised?

CRITERIA FOR AND AGAINST REVISION. Against a revision speaks the following: In principle fidelity takes priority, because a life-decision is built on sincere trust and stable relationship. God himself remained and remains faithful - through all "crises" of the people of Israel and the Church. To take back a life-decision means to break something stable which is painful and costs energy. First of all one should try "to bear one's cross". The inner experience cannot and will not be changed, but following *only* and *uncritically* first impressions means taking the wrong path. A new orientation taken because of a sudden emotion or a more or less lasting spiritual desolation does not solve basic questions. Everyone takes him/herself along, wherever he/she goes. Therefore, every crisis is in the first place a *kairoslo* change or clarify one's call. A person who wants to leave should discern the same length of time which he/she took when he/she decided to enter!

*For a. revision:* The situation is untenable and gruelling. Human dignity or elementary justice is massively violated. The identity of the partners involved (single or group) have developed so far apart that too little common ground is left. The basic values of a former decision - consolation and fruit, relationship and hope - cannot be realised any longer because of changed circumstances. Although one has tried at length and with perseverance to bear one's cross, the up-to-now lived way of life proves to remain spiritually "desolate" and barren. The alternative contains a *More* of commitment and dedication.

PRAISE OF FIDELITY- REPROOF OF RIGIDITY. The abstract reference to the Will of God alone does not give sufficient clarity whether God really wills that one remains faithful to one's choice or should change to something new. Only an extensive discernment which includes spiritual as well as natural emotions, the ideal-self and the real-self, rational considerations and affective reactions, the loneliness of personal prayer as well as the spiritual exchange in community and with the director can be trustful. In the former traditional orderly or disciplinary way of thinking firm perseverance was demanded in one's choice. At times this led to unspeakable suffering simply because of life-destroying and broken down relationships. Today one is inclined towards the opposite - at least in the case of priests and male religious - to dissolve concluded bonds rather quickly without enough consideration on how much damage and injuries broken relationships can cause. In order to find the golden mean Christians need to practise and deepen sober and honest discernment over and over again. Every age has its good and evil spirits and every Christian is influenced by the spirit of the age. Therefore one needs to ask humbly for the necessary wisdom and clarity when making life-decisions. Every commitment which is made in union with God becomes then an *instrumentum* of the actions of the Holy Spirit. In discernment man offers his freedom so that God may gift him with the strength and courage to a relationship which wants to communicate the visible form of the reliable love of God: Jesus Christ.

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