

CONFIRMATION AND DEFINITIVE CHARACTER OF CHOICE

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This title provokes several questions. Why speak about confirmation? What do we understand by: “confirmation of the choice”? How to recognize it in the life of young people? Can we say that a choice is definitive? Or from what moment can we say it? Our elucidation of the title will be based on these questions.

What is at stake here in the confirmation of the choice

Ignatius, once the election is made, invites the retreatant to offer it to the Lord:

“ After such a choice or decision, the one who has made it must turn with great diligence to prayer in the presence of God our Lord, and offer to Him this choice that the Divine Majesty may deign to accept and confirm it if it is for His greater service and praise.” (*SpEx 183*)

Why does Ignatius attach such importance to the confirmation of the choice? Michel de Certeau, in an article in *Christus*, clarifies what is at stake in the confirmation after the election ¹.

« Everything has been done, since the election has been made. But everything remains to be done, since nothing has been executed. The decision taken today has bearing on the morrow; it

anticipates a future that as yet does not exist. After the prayer which developed into the election and after the consent given to the interior call, one must now cross the threshold of silence and confront the daily circumstances of one's life to fulfill the commitment. Once the promised land has been marked out, one must now take possession of it. It is only then that the reality of the promise and the value of the decision will be apparent» .²

Michel de Certeau shows that a long road ahead begins in which the decision will come up against obstacles and doubts that will assail it; these are temptations. But the decision will reveal an affinity to the world through signs. The word understood in the heart becomes flesh in the concrete, and is written in deeds: these are the signs. We can be sure that God gives us the means to fulfill the promise. God will just as surely respond to our story and to the movements that God has inspired. « The present confirms the past, » writes Marie-Luce Brun ³. The confirmation bears on the fulfillment and not on new desires or new lights.

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If Ignatius does not end the Exercises after the election, it is precisely because he attaches so much importance to the confirmation. The election covers the third and fourth weeks of the Exercises: a time of testing, a time also of signs and of putting the election into the context of the Exercises instead of leaving it to be put into effect during the daily life of the retreatant.

For Maurice Giuliani ⁴, the work of the third and fourth weeks is to give the experience of the decision « its true fulfillment » : the election needs to receive the « seal » or « anointing », a sign of the alliance, a « Yes » given by God. It is of the « the very structure of the alliance » ⁵ which is being spoken of here. It is a very intense moment when the election, as much in its content as in the manner in which it has been taken, is judged and ratified.

– CONFIRMATION AND DEFINITIVE CHARACTER OF CHOICE –

How does this confirmation come about in the course of the third and fourth weeks of the Exercises? We examine again the works of Maurice Giuliani, a French Jesuit.

The third and fourth weeks of the Exercises

The beginning of the third week is no longer a question of « discernment ». Nor is the spiritual goal the discernment. After the big interior work of the election, an interior silence is established in the retreatant. In the silence one is called to experience a decentralizing in which one « goes out from oneself » to enter into a more mysterious reality which will be shown to the retreatant. Contemplation of the Passion will draw the retreatant to another focus than to one's own problems, desires and decisions. A call to communion with Christ who is on his way to his Passion is being heard : « In the Passion, it is proper to ask for sorrow with Christ in sorrow, anguish with Christ in anguish, tears and deep grief because of the great affliction Christ endures for me. » (*SpEx 203*). What

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is significant about this third week is for the retreatant to enter into a compassion which stirs the person to live what Christ lived, realistically to experience going out of self. It is not an interior knowledge of Christ in view of the discernment of the election but knowledge in view of a likeness of situation and desire. The purpose is to make the retreatant enter into the same mystery as Jesus in his relation with his Father and in his offering for humanity ⁶.

Thus, the perspective which the retreatant had at the moment of the election is very largely transformed. From scene to scene throughout the Passion, the grace of resemblance draws the retreatant into a way of silence with Christ, of gift, of total gratuitousness in love. It is as if the Election has been absorbed into a light ever so much brighter and of another order.

But it is here that the contemplation of Jesus suffering will give confirmation to the election which is so necessary. In the measure that we enter into the scenes of the Passion, we will recognize that there is in oneself a persistent and renewed correspondence between what we decided in the

election and what has been given for us to live with Jesus who “is going to his Passion”, who invites the retreatant to become like him on this way.

Of what does this correspondence consist? What the election effects is peaceful and is present in the movement of compassion with Jesus without introducing any new alternatives of consolation or desolation. The retreatant enters completely into the contemplation of the Passion; one lets oneself be led, keeping a heart open and ready for what one may have “to do or suffer”, but without setting aside or weakening the content of the election that the retreatant has made, nor even allowing the content to pose the least obstacle to the progress in staying close to Christ suffering. It can happen, however, that such effects are not manifested; a dissonance arises either in the form of a disquieting memory which produces a kind of regression into a previous state, or in the form of a reticence to go on further into the contemplation of the passion, or even of an impossibility to accept this contemplation in faith because of the danger of converting compassion into an unhealthy necessity to suffer. There are other signs of a spiritual condition to indicate that one is unsure and perhaps is still questioning a decision.

We see that the election is capable of finding its confirmation without the retreatant having to seek it. It is given to the retreatant as a fruit, or rather as the recognition that what he has lived was just. It is rather a confirmation which takes effect by degrees, in the measure that the contemplation of the Lord suffering draws one further towards compassion. Confirmation becomes more apparent when the retreatant, instead of multiplying the scenes, stops simply to ponder only one. Instead of going on following the story-line, one turns inward and prays from the heart by repetitions which give to the event that one is contemplating an outreach for loving and for the salvation of the world and “for me”. The confirmation appears in the ease that the retreatant now has to live this third week in a simple and unified contemplation. However on the contrary, when the retreatant contemplates a multiplicity of scenes and does not perceive the unique mystery of the intimacy between the Father and the Son, and is not able to find the centre where all is revealed, then the confirmation is not yet totally given.

Why then is the journey not ended with the Passion? The fourth week offers a new departure for contemplation. The person is guided further and compassion leads one to participate in the sentiments of the risen Jesus. The retreatant, while progressing in the grace of compassion, is invited to

– CONFIRMATION AND DEFINITIVE CHARACTER OF CHOICE –

receive the light which is being shed along the way and the certainty that one is being welcomed by God.

In this Easter light, the election is confirmed in a way that the retreatant experiences it as something ever ancient and ever new. First of all, the person enters into a joy which is pure gift. This joy is more than a break at the end of persevering; it is participation in that of Christ. Each one of the mysteries of the resurrection enables the retreatant to advance into the sentiments of fullness and security in union with Christ, truly victorious over all the powers of death. From contemplation to contemplation, through the interplay of habitual repetitions, and in the extreme liberty left to the retreatant, the election, without ceasing to be an offering, becomes the fountainhead of divine life. The certitude which, throughout the election,

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has been accompanying the retreatant since the end of the second week gives way to a sense of being, like Christ and with him, “graciously granted”. The decision that the retreatant took is confirmed; it offers no obstacle to the receiving of peace and joy, as if the grace of the resurrection created in the soul a new unity in which the content

of the election finds its place and its precise truth. No obstacle: that is one of the first signs of this confirmation. But there is another, yet richer sign: the decision taken allows one to find delight and sweetness in “created things”, to see them “in God”, to love them with a pure heart. All these signs are the “effects of the resurrection” upon the retreatant. In the case of a retreatant who would keep a certain reticence about opening up to the joy of the resurrection and would remain troubled, unsatisfied, fearful before situations and persons which come into one’s life we might wonder if, in fact, the absence of this confirmation is not the sign of a call to suspend the continuation of this work of the decision or at least to wait till these troubled ripples have subsided and become well integrated with the other signs into a harmonious relationship founded on faith.

The confirmation is found finally for the retreatant in the concrete experience of one’s life unified by the seal given at the election. One discovers the meaning and value of the very fabric of one’s daily existence.

Contemplating the resurrection, retreatants do not enter into a world where suffering, the cross, death would be absent; but receive that world as the place where the consolation of the Spirit will henceforth accompany them.

Finally, the last stage of the confirmation of the election: one finds oneself sent into one's very own history, to live in daily fidelity to the total mystery of Christ. The election has quite simply been integrated without violence.

What do we learn through these 3rd and 4th weeks of the Exercises?

We address ourselves to the young people who do not make all the Spiritual Exercises of the 30 days. How do we detect then the signs of confirmation in the life of young people in a manner similar to what arises in a thirty-day retreat? Every one accompanying the young can verify if the decision taken leads:

- To a decentralizing of self so as to be centred on Christ,
- To a compassion with Christ,
- To a peaceful harmony with the election in one's daily life,
- To entering into a certain interior silence,
- To a peaceful, simplified and unified prayer,
- If the decision taken offers no obstacle to the receiving of peace and joy,
- If the decision allows one to find delight and sweetness in created things, to see them in God,
- If one's life is unified: the day to day events have meaning and value, along with the daily sufferings and difficulties,
- If the Election has been integrated without violence,

Then there is every indication to believe that the decision has been confirmed by God, himself.

On the other hand, if the decision taken leads:

- to a memory that is disturbing,
- a reticence about going further,
- a disquiet, a dissatisfaction, a fear facing situations and persons in one's surroundings,
- if, throughout there is no harmony in relationships based on faith,

then it seems that one detects an absence of confirmation and a call to suspend furthering the work of executing the decision. It may be a

– CONFIRMATION AND DEFINITIVE CHARACTER OF CHOICE –

question of waiting until the troubling waters have subsided and a lasting harmonious relationship based on faith can be established with the other factors.

The Definitive Character

In the course of this reflection, we have chosen to approach the confirmation of the election from the perspective of what the retreatant has been living during the retreat. We detect the signs of confirmation in one's life. This very subjective sign is the first sign of confirmation. But to speak of the definitive character of the election, we must look at two other signs of confirmation that we will mention without developing them.

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The first of the two signs, the most objective, is the confirmation of the Church: the admission to the seminary given by those responsible for the seminary, or the religious congregation that welcomes them. Every election needs to be confirmed by the Church; "the confirmation from

it (...) will become at once more sure", writes Michel de Certeau⁷. And finally, the other sign of confirmation which allows us to speak of a "definitive" decision is the lasting quality, the experience that the journey undertaken by the person and begun after the election is, indeed, a life-journey of personal development and growth in interior freedom despite troubles and temptations that are inevitable in life.

But to speak of the "definitive" character of a decision, one must avoid falling into the trap which fixes the decision in the initial situation in which it was taken under the illusion that it seemed definitive because it was confirmed at that time by the life of the retreatant, by the Church and by the permanent commitment. I would like to underscore by that that every decision needs to be readjusted according as new circumstances of life intervene, ever mindful of the reality. The retreatant will have to choose and re-choose to serve God through the working out of the decision which can pass through unexpected and even painful paths. For example, it could happen that a woman enters religious life to go to Africa. Sickness, unforeseen circumstances, obliges her to renounce this project. Will she remain in religious life or leave? She will have to say again her Yes to God

in another way than what she had previously thought. And then there is the example of a married couple who cannot have children. They will have to repeat their Yes to God united as husband and wife in the face of this new given in their life. In the measure that events cause change in one's life so must the decision become more rooted in the given situation. The means may change or be modified. So, it can be said, that it is one's consent to reality that becomes the confirmation. "The confirmation, then, is that life remains and pursues its course through troubles. The confirmation is disclosed as other-centred, its axis shifted all the while integrating our human obscurity."⁸ And Adrien Demoustier says the same thing:

*"I can be certain of what is the object of my election in the measure that I let myself ceaselessly be dispossessed of my way of perceiving it and of representing it to myself. I can thus advance with certitude. Acknowledging the fact, that I will always be more or less making mistakes, I may hope gradually to become wiser. The rules of discernment, above all those concerning the second week, are there to consult in this project."*⁹

¹By a decision, the Christian gives assent to what one has experienced as the will of God, and by that very assent the person accepts who one is in oneself. An interior harmony happens within, confirmed by the peace which accompanies the decision.

²Michel de Certeau, S.J., "The morrows of the decision" in "Will of God and Human Decisions", *Christus*, no. 14, p.187

³Marie-Luce BRUN, "God alone confirms", *Cahier de la Bienfaisance* no.20

⁴Maurice GIULIANI, S.J., « Confirming the Decision », *Cahier de la Bienfaisance* no. 20, and « Confirming the Decision » in "The Experience of the Spiritual Exercises in life", *DDB*, Christus Collection, p. 151-160

⁵Marie-Luce BRUN, "God alone confirms", *Cahier de la Bienfaisance* no,20

⁶Ignatius gives three points which help towards « compassion » (SpEx 195-197): "To consider what Christ our Lord suffers in his humanity" (no. 195): one is invited to place oneself from the start at the centre, at the heart, there where the true story is happening, there where the sufferings are entirely lived in faith. "To consider how the divinity hides itself" and how the strength of God manifests itself in weakness. Finally, "what I ought to do and to suffer" in the reality of the total mystery of the Passion, today and in my own concrete story.

– CONFIRMATION AND DEFINITIVE CHARACTER OF CHOICE –

⁷Michel le Certeau, S.J., "The morrows of the decision" in "Will of God and Human Decisions", *Christus* no. 14, p.197. He takes up again as examples the deliberations of the first Jesuit companions.

⁸Marie-Luce BRUN in "God alone Confirms", *Cahier de la Bienfaisance* no. 20. And for this paragraph : Marie-Luce Brun, « To give consent to the Reality », in *To Dare To Decide*, p. 105-116

⁹Adrien DEMOUSTIER, S.J., *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, Reading and Practice of a Text*, Ed. Jesuit Faculty of Paris, Paris, 2006, p.347