

## OBEDIENCE AND DISCERNMENT

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### *Spiritual discernment of the will of God*

To speak of obedience is to speak of searching for the will of God in order to carry it out. This brings us back to the Principle and Foundation of the Exercises, in which Ignatius expresses the fundamental, global will of God: *to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by means of doing this to save their souls* (SpEx. 23), or in other words, that the human being might recognize God as God, praise God for this and carry out God's will. In this way, one will find the salvation for which one was created.

And all this because God has a Plan for humanity, which obviously includes a plan for all creation: *The other things on the face of the earth are created for the human beings, to help them in the pursuit of the end for which they are created.* The plan of God is a Plan of Life: *that they may have life, and have it abundantly.* (John 10:10.) Or, in the words of St. Irenaeus, *Gloria Dei, vivens homo, vita autem hominis, visio Dei*: "The glory of God is the living human being, the life of the human being is the vision (manifestation) of God" (*Adversus haereses 4, 20, 7.*) *And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.* (John 17:3.)

This is the *spiritual poverty* about which Ignatius speaks in the Exercises (n. 98.) It is the fundamental attitude of recognition of God as God and accepting God's will in our lives. This poverty ought to be at the basis of any decision in our Christian life; it is the total emptying of ourselves in order to contribute – in collaboration with God – in order that human beings *may have life, and have it abundantly.* But as this Plan of God has no other source than God's love, it is clear that the fundamental will of God is that God's love towards us become a reality in our personal and social life. Thus obedience consists in continually searching for this will of God in order to collaborate, by love, in God's Plan of Life.

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As we know, the will of God has two aspects. On one hand, there is what is necessary to arrive at God and what touches upon every human being, as is expressed in the commandments, which has the purpose of preserving human life, not to oppress it tyrannically. On the other hand, there is what God offers or asks of each one in particular so they can collaborate with his Plan of Life, in their concrete life, with their personal, historical, cultural baggage. This manifestation of the will of God is infinitely multiform, as is infinitely multiform the history of humanity and even that of every person in particular.

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This will of God can only be grasped in a attentive and daily listening to the Spirit which communicates to us these invitations, suggestions and petitions of God:

*The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit (John 3:8.) I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. <sup>13</sup>When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. <sup>14</sup>He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. <sup>15</sup>All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:12-14.)*

This attentive listening is called *spiritual discernment of the will of God*. As we see in the Gospel, Jesus lived in a continuous discernment of the concrete will of his Father for him, in the context of the Plan of his Father for all of humanity, which Jesus referred to with the expression the *Kingdom of God*. Jesus lived always attentive to the callings of the Spirit, discerning the will of his Father in order to carry it out: *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness*

(Luke 4:1.) More than once he had to accept these callings against his own sentiments and against the pressures of others:

*Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. <sup>28</sup>Father, glorify your name (John 12:27-28.)*

There is no other way of knowing the concrete will of God in our lives than spiritual discernment. And, even still, this knowing is not infallible. Discernment brings us to moral or "spiritual" certitudes, more or less strong, but never infallible. Ignatius, speaking of the "illuminations of the Cardoner" affirms that *he had often thought to himself [the pilgrim] that if there weren't Scripture to teach us these matters of the faith, he would be resolved to die for them solely on the basis of what he has seen* (Autobiography. 29.) Nevertheless, Ignatius knew perfectly well that this deep persuasion was a confirmation of the faith, not an illuminated understanding of the same. And, as we know, he valued greatly the spiritual consultation with his confessor or with persons who could help him spiritually. He insisted on the role of the guide who accompanies a person during the Spiritual Exercises.

In this way the discernment engaged in by the one who is obediently looking to find the will of God gradually brings the person from approximation to approximation, without being given once and for all the complete truth. This the Christian will have when they pass to the vision of God in this world (following Ireneus,) to the full vision of God at the end of one's earthly life.

Precisely because the individual Christian never can be sure of having arrived at knowing the will of God with absolute certainty, one must always share [conferir] one's spiritual experiences (through which one has accomplished the discernment) with the ecclesiastical community. This is how Paul acted, in spite of the fact that, as Ignatius, he had received great illuminations on the part of God. He says, in effect: *Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. <sup>2</sup>I went up in response to a revelation. Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain* (Galatians 2:1-2.) There are several ways of facing the ecclesial community. One privileged way, which St. Paul mentions, is

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of approaching those who have received a special charism of discernment and governance in the Church; in the case of Paul, *James, Peter, and John, who were acknowledged pillars* (Galatians 2:9.) We have already mentioned above some of these ways used by Ignatius.

Besides the proof of acceptance by the Church, there is the proof of the fruits, which is decisive, even though this test generally requires the passage of time: *You will know them by their fruits* (Matthew 7:16-20.) The later fruits of the life of Ignatius have fully confirmed the authenticity of his spiritual experiences and of his discernment. According to Laínez, Ignatius, in his experience at the Cardoner, “began to discern and test the good and evil spirits.” Thus there will always be the dialogue of obedience in order to find the will of God and to carry it out: one needs to open oneself deeply to the movements of the Spirit of God; one must put into practice what has been grasped in these movements; one must change course, if new movements, in the light of new circumstances, ask for it, always in order to accomplish the will of God. Javier Melloni synthesizes the fruits mentioned in four concepts: *clarity* (in the things of God,) *unification* (of the person,) *leaving oneself* (going out towards others,) *durability* (perseverance.)<sup>1</sup>

### *In the Society of Jesus*

We were speaking of the need of sharing personal spiritual movements with the ecclesial community, in order to proceed with security. For the Jesuit (as for any religious, male or female) one privileged means in this search is the superior. The superior contributes to the common discernment of the will of God, coming from the responsibility that he has received to govern with a spiritual governance. With the task comes the charism. It is obvious that the service of governance which the superior exercises is not limited to administrative and practical aspects. The fundamental service of the superior is that of accompanying his brothers in the common search for the will of God, made mission, be it collective or individual.

For this reason the account of conscience is so important, so that the superior might better grasp the will of God, along with the Jesuit, not only in the collective realms, but also in the individual realm. Knowing the Jesuit better, it is clear that the superior is better equipped to concretize the

mission in a more secure form. All good discernment begins with the sufficient understanding of the reality. A discernment which begins with a deformed grasp of reality, for whatever cause, is condemned to failure. In this case, both the person of the Jesuit as well as the common service of Society of Jesus will suffer.

In this context the dialogue of obedience is accomplished. The discernment of the superior dialogues with that of the Jesuit, in a common, open, and sincere search. All are called to obey the will of God. But, as we have already said, the superior constitutes a special means in this search. This is an ecclesial tradition formally accepted and sanctioned by the Church, which has, in fact, tested its efficacy by its fruits. According to the diverse traditions or charisms of the many types of religious life, this tradition is concretized in diverse forms.<sup>2</sup> For the Jesuit it becomes concretized as, at the end of the dialogue of discernment, the superior exercises his mediating function by making the decision.

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It also follows from what has been said that the superior ought to truly involve himself in the discernment, in order to make of this a real, sincere activity, not merely one that is formal or apparent. This does not prevent either the superior or the one who obeys from having different opinions or inclinations on the issue. What is important is that an authentic process or discernment is accomplished. We remember the position of Ignatius regarding the cardinalate of Francis Borja.<sup>3</sup>

In a letter directed to the same Francis Borja on June 5, 1552, Ignatius reveals himself, at the same time very determined and very humble, in search of the will of God on the issue.<sup>4</sup> His first inclination is to be opposed: *I felt a kind of agreement or inspiration that I should prevent it.* However, Ignatius does not see with clarity and requests masses and prayers that God would make his will clearer: *as I was not certain about the divine will – so many reasons occurred to me for and against – I gave an order in our house that all priests should celebrate mass, and the laymen say prayers, during three days, asking that I might be guided in all things for the greater glory of God.* In the end, after a period of agitation of spirits, Ignatius says that: *at*

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*last on the third day, I felt during the normal meditation, and ever since constantly, that my mind was quite made up and that I was decided – in a way that was gentle and left me feeling quite free – in impede the nomination to the best of my ability before Pope and cardinals. If I did not act thus, I would be (and indeed am) quite certain in myself that I would not give a good account of myself before God Our Lord, rather a wholly bad one. Ignatius arrives, thus, at a spiritual certainty that God is asking him to be opposed.*

Nevertheless, Ignatius would accept, obviously, the decision that the Pope would make. He affirms that, in spite of his own opposition, given the possible contrary decision of the Pope, this would not imply a contradiction, and in this way gives us a fundamental grounding for our discernment, whether within the Society of Jesus, or in ecclesial matters. *There would not be any contradiction whatsoever. The same Spirit could inspire me to take up one point of view for some reasons and inspire others to the contrary for other reasons. ...May God Our Lord bring about – in all things, in whatever way, and at all times – His own greater praise and glory.*

It is illustrative to see in this case that Ignatius gives us a living example of how one ought to act, both the one who obeys and the one who commands. As superior of the Society, he has a clear posture regarding the cardinalate of Borja and considers it his obligation to act upon it. As a member of the Church, he will accept the final decision of whoever has the authority in the case, or, as it may be, the Pope. He enters into the sea of the agitation of the spirits and takes the means to arise from the perplexity.

On the other hand, it is very important to point out how Ignatius lives this process of searching with a radical attitude of faith. Obviously, he uses his intelligence, analyzes, ponders, but does all this in a climate of faith, open to what God wants to show him. This is why he asks his companions for the support of their prayers. Certainly, it is not a matter of “making prayers” in hopes of an automatic and magic effect. Ignatius desires to be enlightened by the Spirit “so that all may be aimed at the greater divine glory.” Ignatius, as we have seen, also applies to his own case the teaching of the “representation of obedience.”

### *Conditions for discernment*

This leads us to clarify the necessary conditions for realizing an authentic discernment.

Before all else: freedom. God loves his free sons and daughters and so desires that they obey with freedom. Ignatius makes this necessity clear when he expounds the Principle and Foundation of the Exercises:

*To attain this it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things, in regard to everything which is left to our free will and is not forbidden. Consequently, on our own part we ought not to seek health rather than sickness, wealth rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, a long life rather than a short one, and so on in all other matters. Rather, we ought to desire and choose only that which is more conducive to the end for which we are created. (SpEx 23.)*

It is true that today the term “indifference” does not sound very positive and requires an exegesis so that it can be understood adequately. For this reason it is clearer to use the terms “freedom” and “availability.” One who accepts as their absolute God and his Kingdom (or his Plan of Life) becomes “indifferent” to any particular way or another, one situation or another, as a point of departure. Upon this “foundation” discernment is constructed, in order to put into practice the will of God.

One of the most frequent obstacles in guiding oneself in a life of discernment are the “disordered affections.” Others have explained with competence the theme of the disordered affections.<sup>5</sup> It will be enough here to note that, to the extent that they are alive and present, the disordered affections are the opposite of the freedom of which we have been speaking. In the end, they keep us enclosed, centered in ourselves. And no one can serve two lords, either one serves God and God’s Plan of life, or ourselves and our own plan: *No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth* (or the disordered affections) (Luke 16:13.)

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### *Disordered affections, culture medium for desolation*

The Ignatian principle on the need for taking one's focus off of oneself in order to be able to discern the will of God is very clear: *For everyone ought to reflect that in all spiritual matters, the more one divests oneself of self-love, self-will, and self-interests, the more progress one will make* (Sp. Ex. 189.) *They should often be exhorted to seek God our Lord in all things, removing from themselves as far as possible love of all creatures in order to place it in the Creator of them, loving him in all creatures and all creatures in him, in conformity with his holy and divine will* (Const. 288.) We recall the affirmation of GC 32, on the relation between personal liberty and the freedom of others (Jesuits): *Our basic attitude toward personal freedom will be that freedom is fulfilled in the active service of love* (D. 11.16.)

On the other hand, coming from the other Ignatian principle, according to which we must seek consolation and peace in our decisions and that we ought not to make decisions in times of desolation, it is good to take into consideration that our disordered affections are a perfect culture medium for desolation. Thus, for a good discernment in obedience to the will of God, it is very important to purify the heart of these affections. The dialogue between the superior and the one who obeys should be as free as possible of them. Ignatius considers that the superior general ought not to let himself be carried away by his passions, but rather that he should look in all good things to the good of his brothers and the service of the people of God: *He ought also to be free from all inordinate affections, having them tamed and mortified so that interiorly they will not disturb the judgment of his intellect* (Const. 726.) This is valid also, obviously, for all superiors. And not only for superiors, but for all Jesuits who truly want to seek and find the will of God.

In reality, subordinating God and God's plan to any other reality than God alone is a form of idolatry. The absolute of the Christian is God and God's Plan of Life; having any other absolute is to create an idol. This is what Hosea states when he puts into the mouth of the repentant people of Israel these well known and profound words: *Assyria shall not save us; we will not ride upon horses; we will say no more, "Our God", to the work of our hands. In you the orphan finds mercy* (Hosea 14:3.)

The discernment which brings us to obedience cannot be reduced to a merely rational or speculative activity. Nadal, as we know, spoke of

three attitudes with which “the things of the Society of Jesus” should be treated: that is *Spiritu, corde, practice*. *Spiritu*: By (many) means (not always by immediate revelations) God communicates to us, and is the principle of all: and in this way we must consider that we are moved and ruled by Him.” God, therefore, is at the center and the foundation of the life of the Society. *Corde*: Not speculatively. Understanding is not enough; the will, gusto, devotion, tenderness, affect, consolation, all must come into play. “What would a person be with only the understanding? A monster.” *Practice*: “Act according to what you have understood and loved; rule yourselves by it. Whatever [se os platica] is not only meant to seem good to you and for you to enjoy it, but rather that at the same time for you to put it to work and into execution.”<sup>6</sup>

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Much less can discernment be reduced to an ideology, whether psychological, or philosophical, or sociological, or even theological. One of the things that most impedes true discernment of obedience is ideology. Discernment is not a reflection during which conclusions are drawn from premises already established, unquestionable and unquestioned, which are then imposed on others arbitrarily. This attitude simply kills discernment. If any Jesuit, be he the superior or the one who obeys – individual or community – hardens himself in ideologies, discernment is simply impossible.

Whoever already knows in advance what the Spirit ought to be saying to him, the conclusions and decisions to which the same Spirit ought to be leading him, does not need (or better, cannot) do discernment.. For this reason Nadal will say of Ignatius that *Singulari animi modestia ducentem Spiritum sequebatur, non praeibat*.<sup>7</sup> “With singular modesty he would follow the Spirit where he guided, he did not go ahead.” We know that the fundamental material of the discernment which one makes during the Exercises are the “motions,” although also one must apply reasoning, especially on the part of the one accompanying during the Exercises. From what has already been said, discernment also cannot be reduced to mere praxis. It is for praxis, not pure praxis. It is said that good praxis is based on

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good theory. For a Jesuit, then, a good praxis (mission) comes from a good illumination of the Spirit, *tasted and savored interiorly* (see SpEx, especially n. 2.)

Ignatius realized his discernment in an environment of great closeness with the Trinity. It was far from being reduced to a fundamentally speculative or administrative activity. It was in a profound dialogue with God that Ignatius grasped God's will. And we know, as St. Ignatius himself allowed us to see in his *Spiritual Diary*, that his discernment was not always easy. Ignatius learned (the already mature Ignatius still learning!) that the center of his life, and of his own decisions, as well as the life of the Society and of its mission, is to do the will of God. And this will of God must be seen with the service of the Church and of humanity. It is a discernment that, coming from the deepest mystical perspective, is directed to the service of love, characteristic of Ignatian spirituality.

Even in these depths (or better said, heights) Ignatius had to be on guard against disordered affections. Ignatius knew that the gift of tears which he enjoyed could constitute a disordered affection. And he himself concludes that tears are not necessary, nor useful, for everyone. In his personal case, he relativizes them and subordinates them to *living humility* and to the exercise of charity. He comes to the conclusion that the only thing that is definitively important, is doing the will of God. *During all this time, before, during and after the mass, I was inspired by the thought, which penetrated to my very soul, of how much reverence and submission should be shown on going to mass when I had to pronounce the name of God Our Lord, etc. Not tears were to be sought, but this submission and reverence (Spiritual Diary. March 14.)* The affectionate awe and reverence," as well as the "loving humility" have for their object the fulfillment of the will of God.

I permit myself to cite amply the same Ignatius, who expresses his total disposition to seek and accomplish the will of God, with tears or without them:

*"Later, in the chapel, praying gently and quietly it seemed that first my devotion had for its object the Trinity, then it took me elsewhere, for example to the Father: in this way I felt within me a wanting to communicate with me from different directions – so that eventually, while arranging the altar, my feelings found voice in the prayer, 'Where do you wish to take me, Lord?' I*

*repeated this many times: my devotion increased greatly, drawing me to weep.*

*“Later, while I prayed on vesting, I offered myself very moved and with tears, to be guided and taken etc. through all these stages, wheresoever He might take me, being over me.*

*“After I had vested, I did not know where to begin. Then I took Jesus for my guide; I also appropriated to each Person His own prayer; in this way I said a third of the mass, receiving considerable grace to assist me, a warm devotion and a great satisfaction of soul. There were no tears, not (so I believe) any disordered desire to have them: I contented myself with the Lord’s will. However, I did say, turning to Jesus, ‘Lord, where am I going, or where...etc? Following you, my Lord, I cannot be lost.’ (Spiritual Diary, Wednesday, March 5).*

The more mystical the Jesuit may be, therefore, the better he will be prepared for discernment and the better he will be able to accomplish, whether with the superior or with the community, the dialogue of obedience. This is because the community also ought to play an important role in discernment for obedience, according to the circumstances. GC 35 says: “A consideration of the practice of obedience would be incomplete if it were limited to the relationship between the superior and the individual Jesuit.. The community has its role to play....In this way, our common mission is strengthened and the union of minds and hearts confirmed and deepened” (*D.A. Obedience in the life of the Society of Jesus. n. 28.*)

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Returning to the mystical aspect, Ignatius says of himself: *And so I remained in contemplation and union with God, wherein I would feel devotion in all things and in all places very easily* (FN II.) Polanco, in a letter written on behalf of Ignatius, calmed Fr. Nicolás Floris, who was worried because he did not feel in himself the gift of tears, telling him that these gifts, when they exist, are not what is essential, and when they do not exist, they are not necessary to be a good Christian and Jesuit. What is essential is the love of neighbor and the effort to help him. Those who, by

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the concession of God, have some extraordinary gift, *do not, for this reason, have greater love, nor are they more effective than others who do not have such tears* (Letter of November 22, 2553, BAC n. 102)

### ***The mystical roots of obedience according to GC 35.***

GC 35 emphasizes the mystical aspect of obedience. It ties the experience of obedience and its exercise to the experience of the Spiritual Exercises. It affirms that “passionate love for Christ” must become incarnate in concrete obedience and be its foundation (n. 8) It invites the Jesuit to live the mystique of the third grade of humility in the exercise of obedience (n. 9) Only in this way will obedience be much more than a simple disposition of discipline and order, geared to the efficacy of the work. Only in this way will it be possible to live obedience “as freedom and self-realization” (n. 17) Formators must “help Jesuits in formation understand and live the mystical source of obedience: an unconditional love for the Lord. (n.38)

As Nadal says that the grace which Ignatius received is a grace for the entire Society, it follows that each Jesuit is called to *feel devotion in all things and in all places very easily*, and so can, therefore, count upon the promise of this grace. It is obvious that, given these conditions, the dialogue of obedience will end up much more robust and efficacious for the mission.

All that has been said so far does not imply that the dialogue of obedience, in the climate of discernment, will always be easy. Even supposing the good will of the superior and the companions, it will still sometimes be difficult. If, unfortunately, this good will does not exist, the said dialogue will be impossible, and will cause much personal pain and damage to the service which the Jesuit owes to the People of God. In these difficult cases, the Jesuit, as Ignatius did, has no other recourse than to go back to the source of his faith in the Lord, which has become a deep relationship of love, who impels him to generous and disinterested service, *(a) faith working through love* (Galatians 5:6)

It is in this context that Ignatius situates the requirement of seeking the obedience of understanding, the searching for more reasons to support what the superior decides than for contradicting him. *“We should be ready to receive its command just as if it were coming from Christ our Savior, since we are practicing the obedience [to one] in his place and because of love and reverence for him”* (Const. 547.) And many times there remains

for the Jesuit no other possibility than to remain in a silence of faith while obeying. Without this profound experience of faith and without this personal loving relationship with the Father, the Son and the Spirit, obedience will become ever more burdensome, confrontational and unsatisfying. This will have negative repercussions for discernment and, therefore, on the mission.

Besides this, the Jesuit must be responsible for what he asks or proposes to the Society, thus, he must present his own requests or proposals he has already discerned. Neither does obedient discernment mean leaving responsibility to make decisions to the superior and avoiding all responsibility for helping with the discernment himself. This is in no way contrary to the total availability which the Society asks. This responsible obedience which discerns in no way implies an attitude of exerting pressure on the superior.

According to Gonçalves da Camrara, Ignatius especially esteemed the attitude of the Jesuit who showed himself open and willing to do anything which the Society would ask of him. He comments that, in these cases, Ignatius was very open in the dialogue of obedience. The confidence that must abound in this dialogue is mutual. According to Gonçalves da Camrara, Ignatius also said the following: *I desire very much in all a general indifference, etc; and thus, presupposing obedience and abnegation on the part of the subject, I find myself inclined to follow his inclinations (Memorial117.)*

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GC 35 certainly agrees with this: *This trust (of the superior of the Jesuit) is grounded in the superior's appreciation of the Jesuit he sends as someone who discerns...Because Ignatius knew and trusted the prayerful desires of the Jesuits he sent on mission, he left much to their discretion.*<sup>8</sup>

We conclude by saying that obedience lived out and practice in a discernment in dialogue will permit us to perform *with great alacrity, spiritual joy and perseverance whatever has been commanded us* (Const. 547.) This is the ideal, not an obedience of last resort, like a oppressive and distasteful burden! A discernment which leads to a joyful, generous and

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abnegated obedience will be the authentic discernment of one searching for the will of God, in order to *love and serve in all things*

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<sup>1</sup> “Cardoner,” in *Diccionario de espiritualidad ignaciana*, Vol. I. 283 (Bilbao-Santander, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> See Michelian Tence, *Custodi della sapienza. Il servizio dei superiori* (Lipa, 2007,) c. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Charles V had asked Pope Julius III to make Borja a cardinal The Pope had agreed. Ignatius, entering into the issue, along with four cardinals, explained to the Pope the problems implied in this decision. See S. Ignatius of Loyola, *Obras* (Madrid: BAC, 1991, 908-909).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 908-910.

<sup>5</sup> Luis M<sup>a</sup> García Domínguez, *Las afecciones desordenadas. Influjo del subconsciente en la vida espiritual* (Bilbao-Santander, 1992.)

<sup>6</sup> *MHSI. P. H. Nadal. V. Commentarii de Instituto. 226-230.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid. p. 625.* Cf. Note 41, which cites another similar phrase of Nadal: *Nole praeire Spiritu, sed sine ab illo deci ac moderari in veritate, et disce gratiae cooperari.* Do not attempt to get ahead of the Spirit, but rather let yourself truly be led and controlled by him, and learn to cooperate with grace.