MAINTAINING THE TENSION

Freedom, Commitment and Discernment

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IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY IS MARKED ABOVE ALL by its sensitivity to the divine freedom. A classic statement of this principle comes in the famous essay of Karl Rahner's in which he adopts the persona of Ignatius:

> God is able and willing to deal immediately with His creature; the fact that this occurs is something that human beings can experience happening; they can apprehend the sovereign disposing of God's freedom over their lives and appropriate it—a disposing that objective argument 'from below' cannot predict as a law of human reason, neither philosophically, nor theologically, nor arguing from experience. … This quite simple-minded, and yet in fact quite outrageous conviction seems to me … the heart of what you tend to call my spirituality.[1]

But Ignatian spirituality is also a spirituality of commitment and relationship. Another classic twentieth-century Ignatian figure, Pedro Arrupe, once wrote about how this God of freedom is essentially relational, and is constantly drawing us into commitments both to Himself and to each other. Though he was writing specifically for Jesuits, what he says applies to Christians at large:

> Communion among us reflects the divine *koinonia*, for God wanted to bind us to Himself in love, for a mission given to us, under obedience, not only as individuals but as sharers together in an apostolic con-spiration proceeding from Him. The union that exists among us follows a divine pattern. The bonding that the Spirit

[1] From Karl Rahner, 'Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit' (1978), translation taken from that prepared for an anthology of Rahner's spiritual writings by Philip Endean to be published by Orbis Books in late 2004. Rahner here attempts to interpret Ignatius' key insights in the context of modern concerns and post-Vatican II faith sensibilities.

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> brings about in a community proceeds from that same unity which love brings about within the heart of the Trinity. [2]

However, in our postmodern cultural context, these two values of freedom and commitment can easily appear to be in conflict.

Earlier this year, a lengthy discussion on the nature and experience of freedom took place in my first-year university theology class. The young people present were for the most part living without close adult supervision or directive guidance for the first time in their lives. It became clear that they felt uneasy about the choices that they had to make. At the same time they were strongly resistant to the idea of those choices being limited in any way. They recognised that long-term commitments were frightening, and that they held the potential for happiness or misery. They were also quite aware that a particular choice led them to further choices, while closing off some of the possibilities that they had originally had. They wanted help—even someone to 'tell' them what to do about these multiple and often interwoven choices—but they resisted giving up any of their perceived power of determination.

These young people were paralyzed as they confronted the banquet of choices presented to them. I suggested that one way of working through these multiple decisions was to determine where they felt that they owed their primary commitment—to God, or to their country, or to their family, or to their moral values, or whatever.

Many of them reacted as though they had been stung. They felt that the very idea of a prior commitment framing and limiting their choices was a denial of their freedom to choose. Furthermore, a number of them stated that they could think of no commitment for which they would be willing to suffer, much less to give up their lives. They may have conceded that their freedom was not absolute, and that they were limited by such factors as their genetic make-up, their social setting, and their economic resources. But they were clearly afraid of themselves establishing any further permanent limits on their seemingly limitless choices.

[2] Pedro Arrupe, 'The Trinitarian Inspiration of the Ignatian Charism' (1980), n. 99. This text has been reproduced a number of times, and was originally published in *Acta Romana Societatis Iesu*, 18 (1980-1983), 115-163, here 157-158. Translation slightly corrected.

When I worked with slightly older students in another setting, this somewhat generalised fear came into clearer focus. I was invited to participate in a weekend programme for sophomore women who were looking for some help with decision-making, specifically about determining their major course of study. I had been asked to offer some guidance as to a method of decision-making. What emerged from my discussions with small groups of the young women was their deep and abiding fear of making important decisions badly, decisions that might have lifelong consequences. They had observed the experience of others, and in some cases they were victims of poor choices by their own parents. Despite what this might have taught them, their own decision-making skills were quite evidently negligible.

Western secular culture has provided an extraordinary array of possibilities for young men and women, especially for those with access to material wealth and education. What secular culture alone cannot or seemingly will not offer, however, is a context of life-giving commitment that makes the task of competent decision-making reasonable and possible.

These young people are reluctant to make commitments for fear that commitments will restrict their freedom. For them, freedom is freedom from commitments; commitments by definition reduce freedom. But the paralysis into which they have fallen reveals that the relationship between freedom and commitment is more complex and reciprocal. When freedom is realised, then commitments are made—commitments which may involve the loss of freedom in one sense, but which nevertheless draw us into key life-giving relationships that, paradoxically, *fulfil* our freedom, and open us up to the possibility of further and deeper commitments. Only if we understand the *dialectic* between the seemingly opposing movements of commitment and freedom can we undertake any real decision-making process. Such a process involves a sustained polar tension; a person feels pulled first one way and then another. It is the maintenance of the tension that protects the reality of each pole. Freedom without the seeming curtailments represented by commitment is an abstraction rather than a reality. Conversely, commitment undertaken without a free decision is a lie—it is not commitment, but rather coercion or slavery.

When freedom is realised, then commitments are made

Ignatius

The writings of Ignatius show that, after important conversion experiences of God's healing presence, his spiritual awareness became firmly grounded in a commitment to the Trinitarian God. His pursuit of freedom then emerged and flourished in the context of that commitment. Modern studies of the *Spiritual Exercises* nearly all agree that the purpose of the preparatory meditations on the Principle and Foundation is to ground exercitants in a conscious commitment to God before they undertake the Exercises.[3] This commitment has to be secured by an experience of God's prior and unconditional love. Without that, the grace of the First Week—that of knowing oneself as a loved sinner—may well not occur, and the First Week exercises may leave the person less free than they were before. Nor will it be possible for the person to develop the kind of committed relationship to Jesus, both human and divine, that is the foundation for any healthy election process in the Second Week.

The Exercises help us to see that when our responsive and fundamental commitment to God and to God's purposes is deepened, so is our interior freedom to pursue the intention of God, which is the exercitant's greatest joy and peace. Knowledge of God's merciful intention can only be experienced in the context of love exchanged in a committed relationship with God. This remains true not only in the context of the Spiritual Exercises formally undertaken, but also in the whole life of the person who is seeking genuine personal fulfilment.

What appears less obvious about Ignatius' wisdom, but can be deduced from his own development, is that his spiritual experience of freedom was also grounded in his commitments. He was committed in faith and service to the Church, and subsequently in fidelity and companionship within the Society of Jesus. And the more committed he became to specific human relationships in relationship with God, the greater was his ultimate freedom to make choices leading to a lifetime of joy and peace.

[3] Virtually all commentators since the 1960s stress the importance of an expressed love and reverence flowing from the received grace of God's overwhelming mercy in determining a person's readiness to engage in the Spiritual Exercises, at least in their full form. There is historical evidence that Ignatius was unwilling to lead Pierre Favre into the Exercises for some time because this grace was not manifest in his experience.

A statue of Ignatius in Seville Cathedral by Juan Martínez Montañés (1568-1649)

It is evident from Ignatius' story that he was at some level committed to the visible and institutional Church before he made a real commitment to God. The *Autobiography* attests that from his youth Ignatius had deep and abiding loyalty to people and to institutions for whom and for which he even seemed willing to die. But it is also evident that Ignatius' commitment to the Church was part of a complex of social, familial and cultural loyalties. These were tied in to some degree with sin and self-aggrandisement, rather than reflecting an informed personal commitment to the mystery of the Church. Whatever the mix of motivations, however, his commitment to the Roman Catholic faith was deep enough and true enough to make his availability to God's grace possible after the Battle of Pamplona.

Once Ignatius turned his life over to God, his commitment to the Church as God's instrument became the context for realising his freedom. And his personal freedom became interwoven with that of other students at Paris who recognised that their own best futures lay in companionship with him, seeking God's glory through the service of the Church. In one way his freedom seemed to become more limited, but in another way a whole new horizon of choices opened up which had been inaccessible to him as one man alone.

We might say that discernment, the practice of discovering the best choice for oneself among an array of choices, is the negotiation of a graceful path between freedom and commitment. According to Ignatius' insights, discernment is the discovery of one's greatest hope for happiness and peace within one's 'providential life setting'[4]—the matrix of human possibilities, commitments, and other contingencies

[4] I owe this language and some of these insights to a long-time friend and colleague, Fr Thomas Swift SJ, formerly of the Missouri Province and now deceased.

of ordinary life given to us by God. This hope is grounded in the discovery of God's desire for each person, and in the liberating power of God's Spirit. The Spirit can overcome the forces of evil that operate within human experience by means of fear—forces that blind, deafen, and ultimately defeat our capacity to choose.

Thus far, I have not said anything very startling about Ignatius' life. But the implications of what I am saying about Ignatius may nevertheless be controversial in modern Western circumstances. Most genuine discernment needs to take place within committed relationships rather than within individual contexts or settings. Discernment processes, including those of so-called personal discernment, are communal rather than private. The point is reinforced when we note the revived consciousness of the communion character of Trinitarian life and of the Church.[5]

I am being tentative here because what I am saying seems to fly in the face of the practice of discernment adopted by many of the disciples of Ignatius' method. Ignatius himself seems to have come to know God in the rather private setting of the cave at Manresa—although we do not know how far his interaction with other people during those months gave him a real context for his prayer and discernment that is not precisely recorded. But surely post-Enlightenment, twenty-first-century western culture demands something more interpersonal. For one thing, this culture expects a certain parity between men and women, between employers and employees, and even between parents and children, which would have been foreign to the sixteenth century. Francis Borja may have been able to discern his future—and also determine the futures of his ten children—without consulting family or friends. But the same did not seem to be true for Isabel Roser, or for the other women who sought to follow Ignatius.[6]

Discernment in the twenty-first century must be interpersonal

[5] Much contemporary theological writing explores the links between Christian communion and the relationship between the three Persons of the Trinity. See, for example, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us* (New York and London: HarperCollins, 1991). Since Vatican II nearly all ecclesiologists have presented the Church as a *communio*, even if that term does not mean exactly the same thing in all of the studies. See, for example, Dennis Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology: Visions and Versions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000).

[6] One of the best resources for data about this cultural disparity among those whom Ignatius directed in the Exercises is Katherine Dyckman, Mary Garvin and Elizabeth Liebert, *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women* (New York: Paulist, 2003).

Moreover, the theological context as well as the social context has changed. Contemporary moral theology from the magisterium has a personalist orientation. This raises serious questions about how far one can appropriately make a genuine discernment of God's desire without involving those whose lives will be deeply affected by the outcome. It seems obvious that vowed religious in communities with a commitment to Ignatian spirituality would undertake all significant discernments communally rather than privately.

Since I do not have more than consultative experience with vowed religious, however, I would prefer to consider other examples of communal discernment here: within families, within lay faith communities such as the Christian Life Communities or Ignatian Associates, and within ministry work groups such as school faculties and administrative teams. In groups or institutions which profess to draw on Ignatian spirituality, and which depend on the personal commitment of their members, it is important that those members are included in the process of decision-making through discernment. I shall consider two quite disparate examples, involving different kinds and levels of commitment.

Freedom and Commitment within Marriage

Doug and Martha[7] met as young professionals after college. Doug had spent a year in the novitiate of a religious community; he had determined that he did not have a priestly or religious vocation; and he had gone back to university to take an advanced degree. Martha was employed as a Roman Catholic campus minister at the large US state university where Doug enrolled. In early summer, shortly after she met Doug but before they began dating, Martha decided to fulfil a long-term dream and make a thirty-day Ignatian retreat. She had been thinking seriously about applying to enter a women's missionary religious community, or about joining the Peace Corps, the Jesuit Volunteers, or another lay missionary project. But the ministry team-leader, Fr Ted, recognised her gift for working with young adults, and encouraged her to think of her work at the campus as another form of real service to the poor.

[7] Names and all specific details of this couple's life have been changed, but the case is a real one.

Martha's retreat was a wonderful experience. She had asked Fr Ted and several other members of the campus ministry team to join her at the retreat centre for a few days of prayer, and to help her in considering her gifts and skills with her director. She felt strongly that God desired her service and took her into companionship, but she found the specifics 'cloudy'. Martha was convinced that God would illuminate her situation and remove any barriers that she might have set up to a fuller and more generous service.

A few weeks after her return to campus at the start of the fall term, Martha started to organize some small groups of students for prayer and service at a local homeless shelter. Doug heard about the groups at Sunday Mass and decided to participate in order to sustain his own spiritual energy. The couple found that they had much in common—especially a deep faith in God and a desire to be of service to God's Kingdom. In the spring, Doug asked Martha to consider marrying him and she suggested that they enter prayer together to determine if this was God's invitation. Their growing mutual attraction was rapidly and deeply connected after they began to pray together, and by May the couple had announced to their families that they planned to marry within the year.

So far, so good, one might say, but did they live happily ever after? Not in any fairytale sense. The couple determined that they were called to support each other in lay ministry. Doug finished his degree work and began to teach, while Martha returned to college to take a Master of Divinity degree so that she could minister more competently in parish leadership. Through the years both have had to re-discern the location of their service several times. At the time of their marriage they decided that theirs would always be a hospitable home, where guests would be welcome whether it was convenient or not. This had to be adjusted when children arrived in the family, but their basic commitment remained stable. Above all, they have consistently submitted important personal and family decisions to a process of prayerful discernment. And they have taught their children to value a commitment to God, and to pay attention to God's desire in their own thoughts and affections. Once the children were around ten, they were invited to participate in family decisions, provided they were willing to pray deeply and to be honest about their concerns and feelings.

This couple has known heartache and wonderful joy. They have had to fight to keep the intensity and beauty of their love for one

Bride and Groom within a Lotus Flower
from the Madhubani region of India

another while fulfilling their children's needs for parental attention and private time. They have struggled with the contemporary secular culture which relegates their values to the social rubbish heap. They have sought to maintain the vision of the Second Vatican Council in their ministry, remaining deeply faithful to the Roman Catholic tradition while becoming more ecumenical in outlook. Their participation in their parish has had ups and downs, but they have remained active in small faith communities and have stayed close to the sacramental practice of the Church.

Through Ignatian discernment they have been able to interweave their fundamental commitments—to God and to one another in Christ, to their children as God's gift and call, and to their ministry of service. These commitments have brought remarkable grace both to themselves and to the others whose lives they touch. Their commitments have not lessened the demands of growing freedom; rather their freedom has been expanded and shaped within the blessed boundaries of those commitments.

I can personally attest that it is not a simple thing for married couples to practise discernment following the wisdom of Ignatian spirituality. But it is possible, and necessary if either partner believes that God has a desire for them and for their marriage, and if they want to live in the freedom that is expressed in the Contemplation to Attain

Love. How can two people who have sacramentally become one flesh be called by a loving God in ways that do not take into account the needs, hopes, dreams and desires of both? Their union is enriched and enlivened by the mutual transparency that they need for an authentic discernment of God's desire. Is that discernment ever certain or perfect? Not on this side of eternity.

Discernment in marriage, I think, begins in conversation between the partners about what is really important to them. It often begins with a decision that will affect both their lives. Both partners have to be willing to pray about their fears and to talk about them. They must disclose their needs without defensiveness, as well as the risks that each one is willing to take. They must discuss their options seriously, and submit them to prayer and reflection. When a decision is made, that too must be submitted to prayer, and it must be discussed alongside the hopes and the fears of each. Such processes may be lengthy at first, but as couples strengthen their communication and their willingness to listen to each other, they will discover a deeper love that makes the process less threatening. It does not come about overnight if it is not already the couple's habit. They may do well to begin by talking to a spiritual director with whom both partners are comfortable.

Discernment in marriage begins in conversation

Obviously, communal discernment is not possible in a marriage unless there is a viable and healthy human relationship, and a reasonable level of Christian faith in both partners. It will be easier for a couple to undertake discerned decision-making if they are comfortable with prayer and with conversation about prayer.

Commitment in Small Communities

I have been participating in Christian Life Communities in the United States for some thirty years. During that time I have seen different levels of spiritual maturity in a wide variety of groups. Some were barely more than social gatherings for good friends, while others were so committed that their members helped each other financially, supported each other through long and painful terminal illness, cared for one another's children, saved the lives of members who were suicidally depressed, and celebrated sacramental and ritual events together including baptism, marriage, orders, the anointing of the sick and the burial of the dead. The most genuinely life-giving of these

groups have centred around the practice of spiritual direction, discernment of significant choices, and various forms of accountability for members' growth in faith.

In my earliest years with the CLC, shortly after the reform of the pre-Conciliar Sodalities of Our Lady, the groups in the United States seemed somewhat skittish about the notion of commitment. Many were vague—at best—about the meaning and experience of Ignatian spirituality. This was reflected in a membership that rose and fell, and in intermittent participation. There were members who participated in prayer but were not interested in service, or vice versa. Some members wanted to participate in local communities but were not drawn to a larger national or international commitment. But as the communities became serious about making the Spiritual Exercises a notable change could be observed. People increasingly appreciated and applied the principles of the personal discernment of God's call. They gradually awakened to the fact that God's call is never for private growth and happiness only. It happens in the context of community, and for the sake of a person's genuine communal commitments.

Christian Life Communities in the United States have scarcely begun to realise their potential as agents for evangelizing culture—but that is changing as some groups take their Ignatian vocation more seriously. Where there are efforts toward real discerned decisions among members there is greater evidence of commitment to community life. Correlatively, those communities where the bonds of mutual care appear strongest are most likely respond to the needs of the poor, and speak out with the greatest freedom in the service of justice.

Communal discernment in Christian Life Communities is not easy, at any level of community life. Are their varying efforts at corporate discernment 'authentic'? Perhaps some would measure up to the 'Deliberation of the First Fathers',[8] and many would not. The vocation of CLC members remains the work of discovering God's desire within the world and for the world in a context of hundreds of possible choices. So the work of growing in discernment skills remains important to our formation process at all levels of participation.

[8] For a detailed description of this famous communal discernment see Jules J. Toner, 'The Deliberation that Started the Jesuits', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 6/4 (June 1974).

Maintaining the Tension between Freedom and Commitment

I began this essay with two brief narratives about the dilemmas of educated young adults in contemporary US culture. From the perspective of Christian faith, the response to those dilemmas must be grounded in a commitment to the Triune God. That commitment is expressed through key relationships, within which each of us is being invited by the divine initiative to realise God's own love. Given such a commitment, a startling array of possibilities is presented to us for our discernment. And each, in principle, can lead us towards the goal of joy and peace in God.

This situation demands a careful negotiation between commitments and options. It seems self-evident that entering into dialogue with the people to whom we are committed is an essential part of discerning God's desire for each one of us. We cannot afford to pretend that we are isolated individuals before God. Indeed, how can we hope to hear authentically God's deepest desire for ourselves apart from the voices of our committed relationships?

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