

MODELS OF DISCERNMENT

By TAD DUNNE

IN A CRUCIALLY important article on ignatian discernment,¹ Karl Rahner finds clear evidence in the practice of St Ignatius that the love of God can produce a kind of knowledge unreachable by human reasoning alone, even the human reasoning of an informed christian. Yet one can read his article in depth and still be quite misled by his language. To illustrate the point and to tease out a clearer understanding of discernment, let us briefly sum up the shape of Rahner's argument in his own words and then ask you, the reader, a question.

First, Rahner's question: can God 'make known to him (a man) some definite will of his own, over and above what is shown by the christian use of reason within the framework of christian principles applied to the particular situation?' And Rahner's answer: 'An orthodox catholic . . . believes in the possibility of a manifestation of the divine will (not derivable from the universe and its principles and facts) which may concern the individual as such and his individual decision'. And furthermore, 'in the Exercises, Ignatius candidly assumes that a man has to reckon, as a practical possibility of experience, that God may communicate his will to him'. The proof of this assertion is that Ignatius's rules for discerning spirits 'are entirely constructed in order to distinguish from all other impulses those which contain an individual manifestation of God's will'. Rahner then explicates the implicit philosophy of the Exercises: 'The individual element, over and above the general, has a positive content and originality, fundamentally and absolutely unique'. Next Rahner asks what is the 'criterion of the divine origin (of an impulse) in order that, from recognition of its origin, the question of its moral worth, as being God's will or not, can be settled'. The criterion is 'the grace-given experience of transcendence . . . for recognizing an individual instance of God's will'. A man who finds God in all things is simply 'discovering the will of God through the experimental test of consolation'.

Now for our question. Is not the election described here basically a matter of discovery? Does not Rahner's language create an image of God having a particular will for each individual man heretofore

¹ 'The Logic of Concrete Individual Knowledge in Ignatius Loyola', in *The Dynamic Element in the Church* (Montreal, 1964), pp 84-170.

undetected? Does it not seem as though God communicates this will through a consciously experienced impulse that goes beyond man's rationality? Is there not some truth in the position that discernment of spirits has to do with removing my own blind spots, that I might see clearly what already exists as God's plan for me?

This is not to raise the speculative questions of God's antecedent knowledge and his providence. Neither is it merely a matter of terminology, since whether one speaks of 'God's will' or of 'What a christian ought to do', we understand, with Rahner, a moral obligation arising out of one's unique spiritual orientation. But underlying the words lies a model of the God-man union which differs from the model Ignatius uses, in spite of the fact that he too uses the words 'God's will'.

The difference is this. Rahner can be said to use a discovery model while Ignatius uses a collaboration model.

First it must be said that since we are dealing with a mystery, some sort of model must be used. The mystery here is God's union with man. A religious experience contains something which St Paul says 'must not and cannot be put into human language'.² Yet we do share our experiences of the Lord and are forced to use symbols and types. The job of the theologian is not to explain the mystery but to remove inconsistencies in the religious man's symbolic language. The mystery experienced demands the assent of faith without complete explanation and understanding, but the variety of models demands whatever explanation we can muster.

Secondly, Rahner, without deliberately advancing the discovery model, certainly uses it. One imagines God first having a definite will for an individual, the individual seeking God's will, God manifesting his will through impulses in the individual's consciousness, the individual recognizing the origin of the impulse and then doing what God wills and has communicated to him. Moreover, it must be admitted that one can read Ignatius and get the same impression, since Ignatius speaks so often of 'seeking and finding the will of God', 'accomplishing his most holy will', praying that God 'may dispose of him according to his most holy will', being 'in quest of the divine will', and so on.³ Ignatius even states explicitly that the director of the Exercises must let God 'communicate himself' to the exercitant.⁴ On the other hand, if one reads merely those paragraphs in the Exercises which deal with the election directly, the discovery model almost completely disappears and another model seems to emerge: the free decision of the individual.⁵

² 2 Cor 12, 4.

³ Exx 1, 91, 5, 15.

⁴ Exx 15.

⁵ Exx 135, 169-89.

This apparent transfer from 'discovery' to 'decision' occurs in the 'Introduction to the Consideration of different States of Life'.⁶ There we are first instructed to 'ask in what kind of life or in what state his divine majesty *wishes* to make use of us'; but then we are to prepare ourselves for perfection 'in whatever state or way of life God our Lord may grant *us to choose*'. Next, in the 'Introduction to Making a Choice of a Way of Life',⁷ the nature of *our* choosing is explicitated. We are to choose moved by the simple intention to praise and serve God. Further on, this simple intention is restricted to what is more for God's praise,⁸ and is cast in its equivalent affective terms, 'to please' and 'to love' God.⁹ Thus, our choosing, for Ignatius, is not simply an objective 'this and not that', nor is it in any way 'choosing' a means to get *to* God, to overcome any primordial split between God and man. The first week of the Exercises should have made it abundantly clear that God in his mercy has already overcome any chasm due to sin. A choice, for Ignatius, is much more subtle and profound. It is the effect of a pre-existing bond of love. It is the necessary movement from love as communion to love as concern. Out of love for God we seek to please him by free choices.

Does it come, then, to a shift from seeing the election as 'discovery' (of God's will, pre-existing our choice, communicated through special impulses called consolations), to seeing the election as 'decision' (of my freely choosing categorically and more progressively determinately whatever pleases God more, out of love?). No, for then the models would be formally incompatible with one another. Models cannot be simply right or wrong. They are not hypotheses but guides to thinking about oneself. Usually they are useful in what they affirm and limited by what they omit. We are seeking here to include all that is valuable in both the discovery and decision models. Moreover, each one runs by itself the very practical dangers often encountered by retreat directors. The discovery model too easily allows people to consider themselves willing enough to do God's will, if only God will reveal it; and so, under God's failure to make himself clear, they wait impatiently for the big message. In the meantime they become quite estranged from his love. The decision model, on the other hand, too easily allows a person to be content that his good intention was enough,

⁶ Exx 135.

⁷ Exx 169.

⁸ Exx 179, 180, 183, 185, 189.

⁹ Exx 174, 180, 184.

thereby ignoring any transcendent, reasonless, internal demand to go beyond himself and his possibilities. The former borders on despair, the latter on presumption. Furthermore, neither of them squares with the rather frequent 'no decision' outcome of a decision-retreat.

This is not to suggest a moratorium on certain expressions (though an expression like 'discern God's will' seems to do more harm than good). The lopsidedness of both the discovery and the decision models lies in the distance they suggest between God and the retreatant. If, however, one's experience of the first week was actually a time of mercy, that distance is already overcome by God's love. The director does not seek to change the language of the retreatant so much as to perceive whether his love of the eternal Lord remains growing and intense. The director listens for echoes from a chasm, muffled by the pious language of 'finding God's will' or 'choosing what is more for his glory'. His concern is to safeguard the fruits of the first week and help to ensure a good election.

If Ignatius's model is not merely discovery or decision, what justification is there for saying it is collaboration? For the answer, we turn to the graces Ignatius experienced in his life and expressed in the Exercises. The key is Ignatius's vision at La Storta. There he was praying the prayer found at the end of the Kingdom meditation and the Two Standards meditation — begging that he might *labour with Christ* and prove his love by *becoming like Christ* in bearing insults and wrongs. There he saw that 'God the Father was placing him with his Son'. Christ, with his cross on his shoulder, was to accept Ignatius in this service, which he did with the words, 'I will that you serve us'. Ignatius, in the name of the small society he had founded, had decided to call the group the 'Company' of Jesus, accepting, in their name, the cross with Jesus. This was no mere communication, no mere discovery or decision. It was a moment in a long movement of loving co-operation. Discoveries and decisions, although they take time in their arrival, only take place in an instant; but collaboration is life-long. Ignatius had been giving the Exercises for at least ten years by this time; he had already formed and schooled a group of men through exercises such as the Kingdom and Two Standards, where one co-operated with grace by begging to collaborate with Jesus. What this vision added, however, is precisely a ratification of a model under which to subsume all other graces, tying together into a single, coherent image all the various movements he had experienced before and all the labours to come. That image was the living companionship, the loving company of an active Jesus.

Thus, in the Exercises, Ignatius, out of the fifty or so contemplations on the life of Christ, gives no parables at all, only six miracles, and about forty contemplations which involve a journey. We are not so much to listen *to* Christ or be amazed *at* him, as be in action *with* him. And always, in every contemplation without exception, Christ is acting in the present, or has a present participle (joyful, sorrowful, just born, as leader, going to his suffering for me, enduring affliction, in his glory). We are with him in his actions, we collaborate with him in love, a collaboration not in memory but in the mystery of the really present. So insistent was Ignatius that we act and labour with Christ that he said 'Love ought to show itself in deeds *rather than* in words':¹⁰ so insistent that our union with him be loving and not merely collaboration that we ask the grace of sorrow with Christ sorrowful and joy because of Christ's joy.¹¹ We go beyond the service of a noble knight to prove our love by acting against egoism and offering ourselves to experience Christ's historical life as much as that is possible.

Further, the rules for discerning spirits find their proper context within the model of loving collaboration, and should not be associated too strictly with the Spiritual Exercises. After all, are the rules really the essential element of the Exercises? Are they meant, in the first place, to guide a radical reform of life? How else can one explain the fact that the rules 'more suitable' (as Ignatius says) for the second week, where a decision is to be made, mention no decision at all, while the rules 'more suited' to the first week, where a decision is forestalled, do? How else explain the fact that the Exercises refer to the rules only in the general introduction,¹² and not at all in the election texts; and similarly, that the rules refer to the Exercises only in their introduction?¹³ In Ignatius's letter to Sr Teresa Rejadella, a few months before La Storta, we find not simply a less formal equivalent of practically all the rules and more, but we find them in their proper context.¹⁴ The point is that the context for discernment of spirits is concrete living in collaboration with Jesus and only consequently is it decision-making.

What is concrete living? To get at this, we must do a kind of archaeology of our own interior. Rahner finds in Ignatius ample evidence that there are two different worlds of knowing: one, a world of rationality, in which I weigh *pros* and *cons* and apply objective norms

¹⁰ Exx 230.

¹¹ Exx 203, 221.

¹² Exx 8-10.

¹³ Exx 313, 328.

¹⁴ 18 June 1536. Cf *Saint Ignatius Loyola; Letters to Women*, ed. Hugo Rahner (London, 1960), pp 331-5.

and respect normative traditions; the other, a world of loving immediacy with God, in which the movements of my heart can serve as guides to knowing what is valuable in my own personal, unique life. But to understand this latter world and to avoid making it seem like a rare mystical achievement, it should be considered as part of a larger world of the heart which I share with people I love. Call it the world of affectivity. There too I let feelings, far more than reasons, be my guide. It is a vast world of inter-subjectivity. In this world, sometimes camaraderie, custom, and/or cowardice make us irresponsible. At other times, love and benevolence are given in good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over. It is a world dominated by feeling, by intuitions, by respect as well as by prejudices, rash judgments and narrow fears. It is quite different from the world of rationality, of cool judgments, of calculation, efficiency, and order. Decisions can be made in either world exclusively or in a mixture of both. Families tend to make decisions within their world of mutual affection, while corporations gather data and weigh the *pros* and *cons* in terms of calculated expectations. But conversely, there are times when parents pour over a budget and decide whether they can afford a new car or not, while corporation vice-presidents may opt for one style of advertising campaign simply because it appeals to them. Most of us tend to think that the more serious the decision, the more important it is to take the rational approach. That seems cogent, since we all know how feelings can lead us astray. But Ignatius takes the opposite stand. If feelings can lead us astray, then we must understand how they do it and take charge of them. With an amazing sense of the depth of man's freedom, Ignatius directs us to allow some feelings and reject others.¹⁵ And with an even more amazing confidence that a man in love can make better decisions for God's glory, he directs us to understand how our affectivity works.

So the rules for discerning belong not to the world of rationality but to the world of affectivity. But even within the world of affectivity, the rules for discerning are not rules for making decisions with respect to others. Rather, they deal with what might be called 'interior' decisions, namely, how to respond to two very particular feelings: consolation and desolation. Furthermore, the logic of what to do when consolation or desolation comes, is in turn based on understanding several things: understanding what they are,¹⁶ understanding where they come from,¹⁷ understanding why they are given,¹⁸ understanding the patterns they

¹⁵ Exx 313.¹⁶ Exx 316, 317.¹⁷ Exx 329-31.¹⁸ Exx 320, 322.

usually follow,¹⁹ and understanding therefore what to do.²⁰ Thus, they are accurately titled by Ignatius 'rules for *understanding* movements in the soul and for recognizing those that are good, to admit them, and those that are bad, to reject them'. The person who can 'discern the spirits' is not one who understands the rules Ignatius gives. It is his own self that he understands. He understands his own affectivity, he respects the dark sources of his own feelings, he has caught on to his own internal games. This 'understanding the movements in the soul' finds its explicit exercise best in the twice-daily examination of consciousness. There, we deliberately attend to what have been our concerns throughout the day, the love out of which we acted, our authenticity or lack of it. We run a comb through the feelings of the day, looking for snarls. This self-understanding finds its most challenging test in the Exercises, whether or not any election is intended. There we deliberately stop looking at the fields and attend to one specific horizon, one ultimate concern: the third kind of humility.²¹ This is the horizon of the entire Exercises — a concern to be living actively and lovingly with Christ.

It is from these basic rules about interior movements and decisions that Ignatius derives a number of remarkably concrete rules about various external decisions. We have a rule for what to do when moved to do something that merely shows some promise for God's glory *vis-à-vis* a suspicion that we may be indulging our vanity.²² We have rules for deciding how much to eat.²³ We have a rule for what to do when the thought of suffering with Christ disgusts us.²⁴ We have a rule for when tears will not come or when we question the amount of penance we will do.²⁵ We have rules, in another letter to Sr Teresa Rejadella, on how to decide how often to go to communion.²⁶ In all these rules, Ignatius presumes a prior understanding, recognition and action about the interior movements of consolation and desolation.

We are now in a position to understand the theology of Ignatius in the light of the model of loving collaboration. Let us connect a key ignatian concept to this model. Daily living in loving collaboration with Jesus is nothing else than 'finding God in all things' — the central category of ignatian spirituality. By daily living we mean everything ordinary — waking, sleeping, talking, listening, thinking, imagining, as they occur in their organic unity when one eats breakfast or writes a letter, even the times when one is aware of being in love, is aware of his

¹⁹ Exx 314, 315, 325-7.

²⁰ Exx 318, 319, 321, 323, 324.

²¹ Exx 167.

²² Exx 351.

²³ Exx 210-17.

²⁴ Exx 157.

²⁵ Exx 89.

²⁶ 15 November 1543. Cf *Letters to Women*, pp 338-9.

horizons. But man also develops, so there is the extraordinary in daily living as well — decisive moments, when custom gives way to crisis, formation to transformation, living within a horizon to experiencing and even extending one's horizon through conversion. That such daily living *is* concrete loving collaboration with Jesus is given by faith. To move to this horizon is christian conversion. Everything is transformed. Not only is one assured that he can 'find God's will' in a critical decision, but the bread and butter of man's life shares the same immediacy of loving co-operation with God. Basically, faith is the knowledge a man in love has. Like a couple in love, faith values what unloving couples fear: self-sacrifice, surprise, a sense of humour in the face of difficulties. But beyond couples in love, faith makes a fact out of an ambiguity: that one's concerns and desires, one's decisions and actions, are not autonomous efforts to improve the state of things; they are in fact God's own presence as love in our hearts informing all our actions. As Lonergan has put it, God must *be* love, 'since he chooses to come to me by a gift of love for him'.²⁷ The underlying faith of Ignatius, that God accomplishes his kingdom through men in love with Christ and who act freely in that love, is the ground not only of discernment of spirits and the election but of his entire spirituality. The amazement we feel at his confidence in dealing with movements within the soul should find its ground not in the rules, nor in his psychological genius, but rather in this basic miracle: that God acts in and through men in love. It is Ignatius's faith that is astounding. God is seen as immanent and transcendent at the same time. The special time of 'consolation without preceding cause' may well be a privileged moment of contact with God and a practical criterion for guiding decisions, but only in so far as it is a particularly lucid glimpse into the contact already being accomplished in daily living. In fact, Ignatius's claim to be able to find God in all things, even find consolation in all things, is precisely his awareness that God is no closer in 'consolation without preceding cause' than in daily living. Thus, he can calmly reassure Sr Teresa that it is often given, even while reading.²⁸

Next, one can understand discernment of spirits as the process of achieving self-understanding by a person living in loving collaboration with Jesus. It is self-understanding, not as the single moment of insight, but as the conscious, progressive dialectical movement of a person within and aware of his horizons. This self-understanding is made

²⁷ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York, 1972), p 109.

²⁸ 18 June 1536. See note 14, *supra*, p 22.

conscious through examinations of consciousness; and the more conscious, the greater chance it has of becoming progressive. It is progressive because an authentic life is not a static one, it develops and it takes time. But it is also dialectical, because the evil spirit can bring on a consolation which is meant to confuse in the long run; so we must learn from our own mistakes. Since Ignatius's horizon is a concern to act in love with Jesus, ignatian discernment demands at once both a transformed world-view and a transformed self-understanding: I am crucified to the world and the world is crucified to me.²⁹

When one uses the rules for understanding the different movements to help a major decision, Ignatius insists that the retreatant offer God his entire will and liberty, not primarily at the time of election, but, if possible, as early as the very beginning of the retreat.³⁰ This requisite disposition of antecedent willingness to follow what discerning may produce is not necessitated by the fact that God probably wills the proposal, nor by the dynamics of human decision-making, but formally by the virtue of hope, by which I neither despair of 'finding God's will' nor presume that an autonomous 'authentic' decision is union with God. By the virtue of hope I say yes to this entire process of loving activity with God — from deliberation about daily life to the execution of a decision. In short, I say yes because discernment of spirits is already loving collaboration with Jesus. One experiences this hoping not as something without presumption or despair, but as suffering the tension of both. In a similar way, the collaboration model does not exclude discovery or decision — it unifies them dynamically.

Finally, one can easily define the election and other exterior decisions as the collaborative decision to collaborate with Jesus in a definite way. It is collaborative decision because I do not make it alone. The love of God acting, even labouring in love for me,³¹ is both its origin and goal. The decision is to collaborate further, whether in a new and specific way of life, by a change or improvement within one's state, or, what faith knows is equally collaborative, to continue in uncertainty if no decision is given.

We have treated three models of the one mystery — the mystery of God's union with man. In summary we might say that the theological grounds of this intimate union are the theological virtues. They are, briefly, faith that daily life *is* in co-operation with Jesus, hope that there is no antinomy between free decisions made in loving collaboration with Jesus and the free actions of God in the world, and charity — love showing itself in deeds with Jesus rather than in words.

²⁹ Cf Gal 6, 14.

³⁰ Exx 5.

³¹ Exx 236.