

IGNATIUS LOYOLA AND DECISION-MAKING

By NICHOLAS KING

*'Consider your verdict', the King said to the jury.
'Not yet, not yet!' the Rabbit hastily interrupted. 'There's a great deal to
come before that!'*

IF IT WILL NOT seem too much like the law-courts of *Alice in Wonderland*, I should like to start by rehearsing the four main conclusions of this paper, before proceeding to consider the evidence on which they are based. The purpose of this rather curious methodology is a double one: to reveal the thematic nature of the material with which we have to deal, and to justify the selection of some facts about St Ignatius and the rejection of others. Which is not to say that I have first selected a theory and then contorted the facts to suit it.

Before I outline the conclusions, however, a word or two needs to be said in justification of a historical treatment of this sort.

In the first place there is a fairly widespread suspicion, both of the notion of discernment ('Some of these fellows can't even blow their noses without making an election', as a priest once said to me) and of the idea of communal discernment, which, in the case of religious for example, would take the form of protesting that they joined the order to do what they were told and not to become a voting member of a democracy. It seems to me that if one can demonstrate the workings of this decision-making technique in the life of Ignatius, than whom no one was a more ardent protagonist of the vow of obedience, much of this suspicion may be allayed.

Secondly, the proper use of the technique of ignatian decision-making involves, as is well enough known, the quality of indifference both as a presupposition and (as is less often realized) as an effect. The belief that a particular course of action is what God wants of an individual or a community ought to give a liberating confidence to go ahead and do it, no matter what. This aspect of ignatian decision-making needs, I think, to be stressed today. For example, the english province of an apostolic religious order recently sent out to its members a questionnaire intended to assist them in a critical examination of their work in the light of an

alarming shortage of manpower. Over ninety per cent of those who replied felt that their own apostolate was of the highest importance and should be given top priority. Now it is possible to draw one of two conclusions from this. You might argue that it is heartening that they were so committed to their work. Or it might be the case that they were reluctant to enter upon any discernment that might call into question their own *raison d'être*, and so they contented themselves with simply airing prejudices; in other words, that they were fearful of what God might be asking of them. Freedom from that (very human) fear would be one eminently desirable effect of an authentic experience of the ignatian election.

Thirdly, a historical treatment is therefore neither a search for a magical solution for all our modern problems, nor a nostalgic gaze at a glorious past. It arises out of the conviction that biographical facts about the man who wrote the *Spiritual Exercises* are of value for an insight into the meaning of what he wrote and its application to our time.

Briefly, then, the conclusions to which a survey of the facts about Ignatius and decision-making lead us are the following:

1. For Ignatius, certain matters cannot or should not be subject to an election. Broadly speaking they fall into two categories: the minor and the irrevocable. Into the first would come blowing your nose; in the latter, questions such as whether or not to serve God, or disobey the Church, or leave the priesthood. For him, the answers to questions of this sort are analytic not synthetic propositions: that is, their truth is evident from the meaning of the words themselves; they are not statements providing information.

2. Although an election is a decision, it is one taken within a specific context, that of a single-minded determination to act for God's greater glory; in that context, the decision can only be taken about means, and the individual should opt only for those means that he sees as more conducive to that end in his particular case.

3. It would be naïve to suppose that this single-mindedness is the normal attitude of human beings or one that they can easily attain to. Ignatius insisted therefore on a careful preparation before arriving at a decision, and on seeking confirmation afterwards. In some cases he insisted that major decisions should only be taken in the course of the *Spiritual Exercises*, which are subtitled, 'exercises, to conquer oneself, and order one's life, without making the decision on the basis of any disordered affection'.¹ As we have already suggested, the almost laborious preparation which he enjoined before coming to a decision is designed to set the individual free to act with confidence once he has decided.

¹ Exx 20.

4. It would be interesting, and probably quite enlightening, to examine the theology of ignatian discernment, in particular the respective roles assigned to God and the individual. Despite the great importance he attached to consolation and desolation,² I do not think that such a study would show that he had made the error of underrating human autonomy.³

In the attempt to furnish evidence for these conclusions, I propose to distinguish three stages in what Ignatius called his pilgrimage: they can be called (somewhat grimly) the definitive choice for God, the ongoing divine pedagogy and Ignatius's first election, and the systematic operation of his decision-making technique.

The definitive choice for God

Every schoolboy knows how it all started. An enforced convalescence in bed, and doubtless the threat of a terrible boredom, reduced him to reading books, and holy books at that.⁴ The little that we know of his previous life suggests that only the most desperate straits would have driven him to this course. Spiritual reading was not however his only diversion at the time. He would spend hours day-dreaming of the deeds he might perform in the service of a very distinguished and noble lady.⁵ 'But God still helped him',⁶ and he started to consider the possibility of emulating the saints in heroic feats of penance.⁷ At this stage he was animated by no more than a rather crude spirit of holy rivalry; but then he was taught his first great lesson. For he noticed that the after-effects of his worldly reveries were very different from those of this more spiritual (albeit no less ambitious) day-dreaming.⁸ 'Gradually he came to know the difference between the spirits that were at work within him . . . and he gained considerable light from this lesson'.⁹ It was at this moment that he made the definitive choice to serve God; and this choice was confirmed by a subsequent vision of our Lady and the child Jesus.¹⁰ It is worth noting that one cannot point to very much here in the way of concrete decisions, beyond a determination to go to Jerusalem (an idea he had already toyed with), the beginning of his practice of writing down things that appeared to him to be spiritually profitable, and a rather nebulous intention of doing a great deal of penance on his return from the holy Land.¹¹

² Cf e.g. Exx 328-36.

³ The last pages of the *Autobiography* and the fifteenth annotation of the *Spiritual Exercises* would furnish a useful starting-point for such a study.

⁴ *Autobiography*, 5. English translation by Joseph O'Callaghan (New York, 1974), p 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6 (p 23).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7 (p 23).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8 (p 24).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8-9. He attaches considerable importance to this discovery; cf 99 (pp 92-93).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10 (p 24).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9-12 (pp 24-25).

Now it is obvious enough that this experience is the first moment in the process that culminated in the formulation of the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits for the first week,¹² and it is no less obvious that another important element in his teaching on decision-making is also present here, in the shape of heaven-sent confirmation. But there are two respects in which this episode differs from what Ignatius understands by election. They relate respectively to the first and fourth of our conclusions, and one cannot really understand ignatian discernment without grasping them.

The first respect is this: although what goes on here is undeniably a discernment of spirits, it is not an election. For Ignatius, once the question had arisen of choosing to serve God, there could be no anxious weighing of arguments for and against. As soon as it was seen as an option, it became the only possible course. In an election properly so-called, the choice to serve God is already made, is part of the information given, and the question to be resolved is how the individual is to live out that service. Another way of putting this would be to say that the First Principle and Foundation¹³ is for Ignatius a set of self-evident truths. The discernment he made on his bed at Loyola therefore shed no particular light on the future; it should be seen as the revelation of an analytic rather than a synthetic proposition. Certainly Ignatius would have regarded it so.

Secondly, when he looked back on this early stage of his conversion, Ignatius was very conscious of the activity of God:¹⁴ not, as would later be the case with the vision at La Storta or in his deliberations on poverty in 1544, in the form of confirmation of decisions already taken, but as a chapter of providential accidents that changed his life, such as the cannon-ball at Pamplona, the limited library facilities at Loyola, and especially the casual way in which he came to Manresa at all.¹⁵ An election is a matter of active co-operation with the will of God, and the term is applicable only to those who are sufficiently spiritually mature to play their part to the full. It cannot be applied to a 'decision' that was really not much more than a passive acquiescence in a powerful divine prompting.

The ongoing divine pedagogy and Ignatius's first election

The eleven months at Manresa were by a long way the most seminal period in Ignatius's spiritual development. It was (for those who like

¹² Exx 314-27.

¹³ Exx 23.

¹⁴ *Autobiography*, 27 (p 37).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 18 (p 32).

to think in these categories) the time of his novitiate. It was certainly at Manresa that the Exercises as a whole took shape; in particular it was during this period that he found profit in meditating upon the two key exercises of the Kingdom and the Two Standards. It is nowadays fairly generally agreed that these two exercises, and especially the vision on the banks of the Cardoner,¹⁶ were decisive in modifying his hitherto rather general aim of serving God. It was at this stage that he began to temper his penitential activities, which in the first few months of his stay in Manresa had been prodigious, and he also cut his nails and hair.¹⁷ He always expected people to begin their service of God in a mood of insane generosity and asceticism,¹⁸ but once the ideal, or particular vocation, became clearer, that generosity had to be channelled. And at Manresa, Ignatius discovered (at least in outline) that the vocation to which God called him was that of apostolic work in a community.¹⁹

Pari passu with Ignatius's discovery of the idea of a vocation comes the realization that his 'holy follies' were the result of his own choice without reference to what God might want of him. One of the great lessons of Manresa was the notion of the will of God (which as we shall see he understood in a remarkably subtle manner), with its implication that a man must be ready to choose one of a set of morally good possible courses of action, simply because God wanted it. He had arrived, in other words, at the idea of indifference as a prerequisite of christian decision-making. Ignatius learnt the hard way²⁰ that one must be free in order to make such a choice; and in both his later practice and his theoretical formulation in the Spiritual Exercises, his emphasis on the need for careful preparation before making an election shows that he understood how hard it was.²¹

We have already suggested that one of the effects of this indifference to all but the will of God is a kind of confident freedom to go ahead regardless. Now we see Ignatius doing precisely that, as he leaves Manresa, determined to depend on God alone,²² on pilgrimage to

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 30 (pp 39-40).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 34 (p 41). The paragraph continues: 'and at this time there were many days when he was anxious to talk about spiritual matters and to find persons who could do so'. In other words, the reduction of his physical austerities coincided with the awakening of some kind of apostolic desire.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9 (p 24).

¹⁹ For a useful summary of the arguments, see Javier Osuna S.J., *Friends in the Lord. The Way Series* no 3 (1974), pp 16-23.

²⁰ *Autobiography*, 23 (p 35).

²¹ Cf e.g. Exx 166-7, 169, 179, 185-7 etc.

²² *Autobiography*, 35 (p 41): 'toda su cosa era tener a solo Dios por refugio'; cf *Ibid.*, 42 (p 47).

Jerusalem. The idea of the Holy Land colours much of Ignatius's thinking from now on,²³ and we may reasonably suppose that his meditation on the Kingdom had given it a much deeper meaning.²⁴ It is quite conceivable that Ignatius thought God wanted him to stay there. If so, the threat of excommunication by the franciscan provincial speedily disabused him.²⁵ This is evidence, if evidence is required, that for Ignatius there could be no question of deciding on anything forbidden by the Church²⁶ (although even this proposition cannot be understood without qualification, as we shall see).

So Ignatius leaves the Holy Land, and it is only at this point, over two years after his conversion, that we find him actually making his first election. (It cannot be too strongly emphasized that careful preparation is needed if a man is to discern the will of God. Which is why in the Exercises the election has such a central position.) Up to now, each of his moves has been dictated either by circumstances or by an ineluctable inner prompting; now he must make up his own mind. It is significant that his description of the situation which forced him into a decision includes, for the first time in the *Autobiography*, the use of the phrase 'the will of God': 'when the pilgrim realized that it was not *the will of God* that he should stay in Jerusalem . . .'.²⁷ We have no account of the procedure he adopted to make the election. All we know is that the decision was not an easy one; but 'in the end he was more inclined to study for some time, in order to be able to help people'.²⁸

For our purposes, this passage is of interest on three counts. In the first place, the result of the election is a further clarification and narrowing of his vocation, so that he now saw that a certain amount of study would make his apostolate more fruitful. Secondly, the quality of his indifference may be measured by the fact that he chose to study. A man of his age and background can hardly have been attracted by the prospect of re-training, of going to school with small boys,²⁹ though doubtless he did not foresee that it would last for ten grim years. The point is that because it was the will of God he was free to do it, and confident that it was for the best. Thirdly, the passage sheds some light on the meaning Ignatius gave to the phrase 'the will of God'. There is no indication

²³ Cf the companions' later determination to go to Jerusalem, and their understanding of Rome as their Jerusalem: cf Rodrigues, *Commentarium*, MHSI, FN III, 15, and MHSI, *Monumenta Bobadillae*, pp 616-17.

²⁴ Cf e.g. the extraordinary story of his return to the Mount of Olives, *Autobiography*, 47, (pp 50-51).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

²⁶ Cf Exx 170, 352-70.

²⁷ *Autobiography*, 50 (p 54).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ In fact he found it very hard; cf *Ibid.*, 54-55 (pp 59-60).

whatever of any direct divine inspiration, as there had been earlier. The language in which he describes his decision suggests emphatically that he arrived at it on the basis of reason alone, as in the third time for making an election.³⁰ In other words, he had not only realized the logical equivalence of 'what God wants' with 'what is best'; he had also grasped the implication of this, that ordinary human reason can (under certain circumstances) come to know the will of God.

Systematic operation of the technique

So far we have adduced no evidence to show that Ignatius was an original thinker in this matter, or indeed any other. Nor do we intend to, for he was nothing of the kind. The distinctive nature of his contribution is his meticulous organization of the spiritual truths he had been taught by God, and his unerring ability to select from the traditional teaching on discernment of spirits only those elements which resonated with his experience,³¹ and it is for this reason that a historical study is of value today. For yesterday's original thinker is today's peddler of platitudes, while the man with the rare ability to structure everything as means towards a single end is quite likely to have something to offer for all time.

We cannot of course here go into the textual history of the *Spiritual Exercises*, but there are a number of indications that by January 1534 (some ten years after his first election) he had applied his extraordinary powers of systematization to the lessons he had learnt about discernment. For it was in this month that he started to give the Exercises to the companions in Paris, and from what they tell us it is quite clear that he was scrupulous in observing his own injunction to the retreat-director in the fifteenth Annotation.³² A more impressive piece of evidence comes in the summer of that year, when the first companions held their first community deliberation. It was in the communal search for the will of God that the Paris companions came to understand the nature of their vocation as a group, and this readiness for discernment in common was precisely what marked off those first jesuits as different from (for example) the group of four that had been with him in Alcalá and Salamanca.³³

³⁰ Exx 177-84.

³¹ Cf Dominique Bertrand S.J., *Un corps pour l'Esprit* (Paris, 1974), p 8.

³² Exx 15; cf Osuna, *Friends in the Lord*, pp 51-53.

³³ MHSl, *Monumenta Ignatiana*, Series 4, vol 1, pp 600, 606-07; Polanco, *Summ. Hisp.* 35; in MHSl, FN, 1, 170-1.

We have evidence of a series of such community deliberations as the founding fathers of the Society of Jesus hammered out their own identity, in dialogue with each other and with God, culminating in (but not concluding with) the election known as the *Prima Deliberatio* of 1539, in which they eventually decided to become a religious order. We shall concentrate on this deliberation to the exclusion of the others, because it is of this that we have the fullest account. It should be said that what we know of the others indicates that in each case they went about making their election in the same way.³⁴

The situation that provoked the deliberation is well enough known. In the early months of 1539, the tiny group of ten began to be in demand all over Italy, and very soon their services were requested throughout the world. Up to this point, with various intermissions, they had managed to pursue their apostolic work as a group, and, through the interplay of their work and community discussions, had arrived at an increasingly clearer idea of what it was God wanted of them. Now however the situation had altered. On the one hand they regarded this as the moment they had been waiting for,³⁵ the time to start living their vocation. On the other hand the prospect of imminent separation forced them to pose a further question about their vocation: should they — did God want them to — remain as a group, even though the group might never again be re-united (as was in fact to be the case)? And if so, should they turn themselves into a religious order? Once again we cannot but notice the group's indifference: if it was what God wanted, they were ready to put aside the deep ties of friendship that had grown up over the years.

Faced with this characteristic election-situation, they were well aware of the importance of making the decision properly, and at one point they actually considered going off to make the Exercises again in order to find the answer.³⁶ They decided, however, that this would not be feasible, given their heavy apostolic commitments, and determined 'to give half the day to this our chief business, so as to have more time and leisure to meditate, reflect, and pray; and the rest of the day we would spend in our accustomed exercises of preaching and

³⁴ For a defence of this undefended proposition, see Osuna, *op.cit.*, ch. 2, esp. pp 54-58 and 69-85.

³⁵ MHSI, *Monumenta Ignatiana*, Series 3, vol 1, 1-2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*; cf Osuna, *op. cit.*, p 107. Much of what follows is drawn from Osuna's admirable discussion of the *Prima Deliberatio* (pp 104-13). There is also an excellent commentary by Jules J. Toner S.J. in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, vol VI, no 4 (June 1974).

hearing confessions'.³⁷ When they ate or slept is anyone's guess. The important point for us to note is that they evidently believed that the method evolved by Ignatius could be employed even by a busy apostolic community to make important decisions.

The first question was easily enough resolved: they determined that they would remain a group, on the grounds that they should not break up a union made by God.³⁸ The second question, whether they should vow obedience to one of their number, proved less tractable, however, and they found it difficult to reach agreement. Notice that the idea of 'agreement' was conceived in quite unpolitical terms. They saw the stalemate not as an impasse between two sides, but as a failure to discern clearly what God wanted. So they adopted the methodology for making an election in the third time,³⁹ and followed it scrupulously.

First they prepared themselves by prayer, reflection and meditation; then they came together, and tried to ensure that the question was clearly posed (and no doubt also that it might be debated with as little heat as possible) by offering the reasons against obedience on one night, and on the next the reasons in favour. They tried consciously to look for 'joy and peace in the holy Spirit' on the question; so it is clear that it was God's will, and not a human compromise, that they were seeking. For the same reason, none of them discussed the question with any of the others outside their meeting each evening. They tried to take the detached view of their situation suggested in the Exercises,⁴⁰ and they agreed that they would adopt the view of the majority after a sufficiently mature discussion in the light of the holy Spirit. This 'majority' should not be understood in political terms as the working of a democratic system, but as an indication of the will of God for the group;⁴¹ and when each of them agreed in advance to abide by the majority's decision, he was announcing that (ultimately) he was indifferent, and therefore free to follow the prompting of the Spirit. In the event their conclusions were unanimous, and they confirmed them by offering them to God, and sealing their debate with a community eucharist at which everybody proclaimed their assent to the decision. This outcome gave them immense joy, and (more importantly perhaps) an impressive sense of freedom to go where God called them and do what he asked.

³⁷ MHSI, *Monumenta Ignatiana*, Series 3, vol 1, 4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

³⁹ Exx 178-83.

⁴⁰ Exx 185.

⁴¹ Cf on this point Osuna, *op. cit.*, discussing an earlier deliberation.

Again and again in the life of Ignatius and of the group we find this striking link between indifference and apostolic liberty, and it seems to me that it will be quite important over the next few years, especially perhaps for religious, to reflect on the bearing of this on our own situation. Four further incidents are worth mentioning here, each of which underlines a different aspect of what we have been trying to say about Ignatian decision-making.

(i) In April 1541, Ignatius reluctantly, and after several attempts at escaping, accepted the unanimous vote of his companions, and became the first general of the Society of Jesus,⁴² a task to which he gave himself wholeheartedly for the remaining fifteen years of his life. Having enthusiastically embraced the apostolic ideal, he was now compelled to renounce virtually all apostolic activity in order to govern the Society. He was free to do so, because he wanted only to do God's will.

(ii) In the previous year, when the canonist Cardinal Guidiccioni seemed to be on the point of arguing that this new body should adopt the rule of one of the existing religious orders, Ignatius ordered 2,000 masses to be said in order to prevent this.⁴³ Once the Church had spoken, Ignatius would of course obey without question. But he was certainly not above attempting to ensure that the Church made the correct decision.

(iii) This becomes clearer if we consider the incident of Borgia's hat. In April 1552, Ignatius heard that there was a risk that Borgia might be given a cardinal's hat, through the well-meaning intervention of Charles V of Spain, to which the Pope was inclined to accede. The Society had already decided that as far as possible it would refuse any ecclesiastical honours that might be offered to its members, and on this matter Ignatius felt so strongly that he was able to resist the suggestion even to the extent of lobbying the college of cardinals about it. In a letter written to Borgia in June of that year, he explains why:

. . . I was not certain about God's will in this matter, because many reasons came to me on both sides, so I ordered that all the priests in the house should offer their masses for three days . . . that I might be guided in all things to God's greater glory . . . at last, on the third day, both during my customary prayer and afterwards, I found myself so confident, and with such a free will to oppose the Pope and the cardinals in this matter, that I felt, and still feel, certain that if I did not do so, I should be unable to give an account of myself before God.

⁴² MHSI, *Monumenta Ignatiana*, Series 4, FN, 1, 17-19.

⁴³ Polanco, *Chronicon* 1, 72.

Once he had made his election, he felt free to take on everyone, including the institutional Church; but at the same time, his conviction that this was the will of God for him did not itself become so disordered an affection that he saw it as the course which the Pope *must* pursue:

there would be no contradiction (if others still wanted to give Borgia the hat), since the same spirit might move me one way for various reasons, and others the opposite way . . . ; may God act in all things for his greater praise and glory.⁴⁴

So Ignatius left the matter up to Borgia, who toyed with the idea for a further two years, before finally turning it down after his solemn profession. Ignatius knew only the will of God for himself, and never made the mistake of elevating his own discernment into an infallible decision.

(iv) When Ignatius made an election, he did so, as we have seen, with great humility. He knew from his own experience that even the most carefully made decision about the will of God might be mistaken, and he always sought confirmation, not only in practice, but also in the form of 'consolation' from God. The *locus classicus* for this is of course the few pages that survive from his Spiritual Diary of 1544,⁴⁵ in which we can see him agonizing at length over a tiny point in connection with poverty. This provides us with a useful *caveat* on ignatian discernment: an instance like this of his decision-making technique failing to give an immediate answer to the question should warn us that there is nothing magical about discernment.

Two concluding reflections

Since we have already offered the conclusions of this paper, it would be somewhat redundant to suggest any here; but two remarks might be made by way of tying together what we have been saying.

Firstly, objectivity in human reasoning is something of a wild goose. In all probability there is no such thing. When Ignatius (and hence those who stand in his tradition) asks what is the best thing to do, they do so, not in a Diogenean barrel, but in a definite context. Ignatius's genius lay in reducing that context as far as possible to one presupposition, that 'man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord',⁴⁶ and to

⁴⁴ MHSI Epp. Ign. iv, 283-85.

⁴⁵ *Obras Completas de San Ignacio de Loyola* (Madrid, 1963), pp 301-86. English translation by W. J. Young S.J. (Woodstock, 1958).

⁴⁶ Exx 23.

decide, in each case where a decision was called for, on the basis of that presupposition: that is, to choose only what means conduce to that end, and to reject all others.

Secondly, although it is an important fact about Ignatius that with his characteristically accurate theological insight he gave human reason its full role in decision-making, it remains true that for him the second time of election takes priority over the third, and any decision made on the basis of rational calculation requires confirmation in the form of heaven-sent consolation and desolation.

At all events, human decision-making is for him something to be treated with total seriousness, and the rational process must be duly gone through. Returning to where we started from, let me end with a quotation that encapsulates some of the things that ignatian discernment is not.

'Let the jury consider their verdict', said the King, for about the twentieth time that day. 'No, no!' said the Queen. 'Sentence first, verdict afterwards.'

FRIENDS IN THE LORD

A Study in the Origins of Apostolic Community
in the Society of Jesus

by Javier Osuna S.J.

translated by Nicholas King S. J.

Price including postage

£1.50 (\$5.00)

THE WAY SERIES

39 Fitzjohn's Avenue

London, NW3 5JT

England