

# AFFECTIVITY, CONSCIENCE AND CHRISTIAN CHOICE

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**I**GNATIAN spirituality is about choosing. Ignatius believes that it is possible to make right christian choices, and this is how he describes the Exercises:

Spiritual exercises for the overcoming of self and the regulation of one's life on the basis of a decision arrived at without unregulated motive.<sup>1</sup>

At the outset then, Ignatius suggests to the retreatant that his life is probably not well regulated; that this state of affairs will continue until self is overcome; and further, that to set one's life in order, this regulation will demand a decision, which will not achieve its purpose if it is simply another expression of an ill-regulated life. Most people who are acquainted with ignatian spirituality feel quite at home with this sort of presentation: the context may be austere but we know where we are. Ignatius had a realistically unoptimistic judgment of men; and we, in our turn, from the knowledge of ourselves and our educated experience of others, are well aware of the motives which corrupt christian choice. Hence we have tended, in theory if not in practice, to emphasize the overcoming of self, under the persuasion that if this is achieved there will be little difficulty in coming to right choices. It is here precisely that the practice of discernment of spirits has been neglected. Not that it was discountenanced as such, but it operated only within a closed system, for testing the reality of one's prayer-life. Just as wars are much too important to be left to the soldiers, so spiritual decisions were too important to be left to discernment of spirits. Other means of deciding were considered to be less likely to suffer from inordinate affections.

The attitude may be limited, but it is not absurd. We are all aware that alleged discernment and the flood of its technical vocabulary can smother the wrong. There is often much talk about discernment when the matter at issue has nothing to do with right choices, but with the threatening difficulties of putting right choices into effect. And what of the sad search for pseudo-discernment in support of a decision already taken? It is small wonder that, in the practical order of making

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<sup>1</sup> Exx 21.

christian choices, so-called discernment of spirits has been regarded with suspicion. There is obviously something in the view that bad discernment drives out good. Perhaps if we had used discernment of spirits more sparingly and knowledgeably, both negatively by rejecting the counterfeit, and positively by following more precisely the teaching of St Ignatius, the process would be less daunting. For there can be no doubt that, both for individual persons and for communities, discernment becomes the more necessary as greater freedom is thrust upon us.

In the ignatian pattern, discernment of spirits, the testing of the interior movements of the heart, is inseparable from serious choosing. From the outset, when he speaks of the help and benefit which the director and maker of the Exercises should expect to receive, Ignatius takes it for granted that movements of the spirits are normal. If there is neither spiritual comfort nor distress, if the retreatant is not moved at all, the director may well suspect that there is something less than full co-operation.<sup>2</sup> The Annotations are a blend of orderly prescription and liberty of spirit: if you wish to follow the leading of the Spirit towards effective decision-making, do these things and see what happens.<sup>3</sup> The director is given warning of what to expect: he is told when precisely to introduce the instruction in discernment of spirits<sup>4</sup> and what the dangers are.<sup>5</sup> The practical thrust of the annotations is to enable the director to co-operate in arranging circumstances within which the Creator will deal directly with his creature and the creature with his God.<sup>6</sup> There can be no coming to a christian decision without the observation and handling of a person's interior impulses. Discernment of Spirits is not an optional extra for those who like that sort of thing. This is important. St Ignatius knew all about the dangers of error, illusion and illuminism: but he did not shrink from teaching experiential knowledge of spirits and requiring its practical use. This can only mean that he saw the discernment of spirits as a practical, probably as *the* practical, means of finding the will of God and of acting consistently within it. This is not to say that formal election as set out in the Exercises is the only way to come to a sound christian choice; nor that the only function of discernment of spirits is to contribute to christian choice. Rather it is to say that for sound christian choice in important matters, discernment of spirits must have its place if we accept the ignatian method.

<sup>2</sup> Exx 6.

<sup>3</sup> Exx 1-20.

<sup>4</sup> Exx 6-10.

<sup>5</sup> Exx 14, 18.

<sup>6</sup> Exx 15.

Although the authentic ignatian process is not necessarily to be limited to the course of the Exercises, any application of it must follow the principles of the Exercises: this is not only because the situation of election is classically within them, but because the election is the cutting edge of a very heavy blade. It assumes and requires spiritual endowment and gifts of grace which do not belong to the hurly-burly of normal life. The ignatian election is not just for everyone.<sup>7</sup> It demands a fruitful progress through the Exercises which themselves are designed to lead up to it. Clearly, it is illusory to confront the exercitant with the election if the first week has not been real, if the kingdom of Christ has not been attractive, if the third mode of humility does not engage, if the Two Standards are no more than interesting, if there is no appreciation of what effective commitment means. This of course means that election must be prepared for, but also that the attitudes and convictions arising from the preparation are themselves carried into the election as integral to it. It must also be taken for granted that throughout this preparatory process both the movement of the spirits and the discernment of those movements have been operative. It is not as though a new element of affectivity is suddenly introduced with the matter of election. What is involved is discernment about affective experiences which have a bearing upon christian choice.

Ignatius, then, expects the movements of the spirits, but when he comes to the process of election itself the discernment of those movements becomes even more crucial. So he recapitulates what he considers to be the necessary and fundamental attitudes: the means shall be drawn to the end and not the end to the means; complete single-mindedness shall rule; whatever choice is made shall be solely for the purpose of helping to achieve the ultimate end; God and his service alone matter; our purpose has meaning only in relation to God and his will.<sup>8</sup> Obviously these emphatic reminders are meant to warn against possible perversion of motive. But it is interesting that Ignatius thinks that it remains necessary to set them down in detail even after all the preparatory work of the first and second weeks. It is also significant that he spells out what we might judge to be so blindingly obvious as to need no statement:

Anything that we propose to make a decision about must be good, or at least not bad in itself; it should also be of positive advantage to our holy mother the apostolic Church, or at least not bad and contrary to her interests.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Exx 18.

<sup>8</sup> Exx 169.

<sup>9</sup> Exx 170.

There are several good reasons for these solemn admonitions. Ignatius certainly wishes to remind those who are within a mutable election what they should be about;<sup>10</sup> whereas not everyone is sufficiently aware of what the quality of their living should be. But it seems more likely that his purpose in emphasizing these points is because he is presently going to insist upon investigation into and awareness of the affective response to possible choices. He is stipulating what attitudes of soul are needed before anyone can honestly invoke the movements of the spirits as relevant to the spiritual choice he is to make: Ignatius knows how deceitful and powerful the affect can be.

This is not to say that before we can make any accurate use of spiritual movements we must have a solid structure of sound attitudes. It is clear that the recognition of what is of the 'bad spirit' and of the good spirit can be operative in any moment of spiritual awareness. But it is necessary that there be a solid structure before spiritual movements can be used accurately for election. And indeed it is in these circumstances that skilled and accurate discernment is necessary. It is not a soft option, but rather something to be purchased under God with an honesty and self-forgetfulness that verges on the heroic.

It is clear, then, that Ignatius is not talking of just any affective state which is more or less relevant to the interior life. What is interesting is this, that after setting decision by election in so exacting and almost rigoristic a mould, he then turns to the spiritual experience of consolation and desolation as a criterion for decision. It is as though he is saying that to be able to appeal to spiritual movements with honesty and authenticity you must be virtually immune to feelings; but that to be moved legitimately by spiritual affectivity is itself necessary to the ignatian process; and this is not the same as simply being moved by feelings. Doubtless some such judgment has led to the idea that when Ignatius speaks of consolation and desolation he is speaking of experiences that, if authentic, are so spiritually refined as to escape ordinary sensibility.

But Ignatius's descriptions of consolation and desolation do not suggest that they are refined beyond ordinary sensibility: they are experienced and can be expressed in recognizable language — a language describing normal affective states: '... interior movement experienced by the soul . . . love . . . tears . . . joy . . . peace and tranquillity'.<sup>11</sup> But this is not just affective state as such, but affectivity intimately associated with God as the reality of life. Thus, '... love for its Creator

<sup>10</sup> Exx 171, 172, 174.

<sup>11</sup> Exx 316.

and Lord . . . it can no longer love any earthly creature in itself, but only in the Creator . . . tears leading to the love of God . . . tears . . . directly concerned with his service and praise . . . increase of hope, faith and charity; to all interior gladness which attracts and calls a man to what is genuinely good for him . . .'.<sup>12</sup> Clearly the prime result of this affectivity is attachment to God and the things of God, and detachment from all that is not seen in the context of God. The coherence between these characteristics and what have been stressed as the necessary dispositions for discernment by spiritual movements is clear enough: if it is not like this, it is not consolation; but equally if it does not *feel* like this, then it is not consolation either.

And conversely for desolation:

. . . whatever is opposite to the foregoing — darkness of soul, disquiet of mind, an attraction to what is coarse and earthly, all restlessness proceeding from different temptations and disturbances such as the temptation tending to destroy faith, hope and charity; the condition in which the soul finds itself listless, apathetic, melancholy.<sup>13</sup>

Here again there is the double description: the state feels like this and this is what it tends to do.

Having stated what the spiritual posture of the retreatant must be if he is to proceed to honest and sound election, Ignatius makes further stipulations about the times when correct decision can be made. These three times are quite different from each other.<sup>14</sup> Each can lead to decision because of the clear perception of what God's will is for me: it is important to stress this fact of clear perception, for if it is not given its due weight we will receive a totally wrong impression of the place of affectivity in the ignatian process. The precise point is: what is it that brings the perception that here is God's will?

'When our Lord God is so obviously working on and drawing the will that without hesitation or the very possibility of hesitating the soul follows the lead given'. This sort of influence is primarily upon the will, and is the Spirit's work entirely; it confers upon the soul a 'state of devotion'; and because of its strength and its obvious source in God, the soul follows what it perceives to be God's lead. The soul is overtaken by God's decision rather than choosing for itself. It would not seem that this process is open to discernment as such, for one of the rules of this game is that there is no 'hesitation or even the possibility of hesitating'. It will, however, be necessary to apply the last of the rules of discernment in order to preclude what might only be the effects of 'afterglow', as distinct from the 'actual comforting'.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Exx 317.

<sup>14</sup> Exx 175.

<sup>15</sup> Exx 336.

The second time is quite different:

The mind is quite clear, deriving its knowledge from previous experience of comfort and distress and being versed in the art of discriminating between different spiritual influences.<sup>16</sup>

This neither says nor means that the mind is swept to decision in a state of intense consolation, after the manner of the first time — if indeed that is necessarily a time of consolation. Rather the emphasis is upon 'previous experience', which stands as knowledge to be judged by a mind which is clear. It might be said that such a clarity of mind would itself be a consolation; but the point is that the decision will be made not because of this consolation. Rather it suggests something like this: whenever I have moved towards a particular decision, I have found in one way or other comfort of soul; whenever I have moved away from such a decision I have experienced discomfort of soul; this comfort or discomfort together with the decision itself all conform to the established norms for openness and honesty. The 'clear mind' judges that the movement towards the decision is of God. But then, since I have been through not simply this one process, but others like it, I come to know myself, so that I can say that this is how I work under God. The previous choices arrived at in all honesty will inevitably contribute to the presently valid spiritual experience. In the practical order it is the history of such choices, their motivations and the experience connected with them, and more immediately the similar sort of interior movements observable in experience, which furnish the matter upon which the clear mind will judge. Psychologically, the constant element is the person adequately considered; theologically, it is the dealing of God with man, shepherding him through to individual decision. Concretely, in any given decision the person decides in the light of a whole experience which leaves out nothing: memory, understanding, will or sensible affectivity, provided that all these are God-centred in so far as honesty before God will permit and persuade. In this it would be unsound to see Ignatius as either inclined to rationalism or anti-rationalism; it would, if one must put it into words, be more true to the data to see his approach as a theocentric personalism. It is certain that Ignatius is not speaking of a merely transitory experience as if this were self-validating and conclusive for deciding. But it is equally certain that he directly invokes spiritual experience with its concomitant qualities of spiritual light and colour and warmth and joy — or their opposites — as God-given indications of how one is being led to decide.

<sup>16</sup> Exx 177.

But with the third time for deciding we seem to have a change of accent. Instead of the process, which indeed previously and presently requires an almost heroic orientation of honesty — depending upon what has been affectively experienced, the cold, hard operations of reason and will appear to take over. In this time the soul is undisturbed, that is, 'when it is not troubled by different spiritual influences, but can make use of its natural faculties freely and in peace'. The inference from the text is that Ignatius rather expects that the two methods which he gives will be invoked when 'the election does not come off on the first or second occasion', as Fr Rickaby renders it.<sup>17</sup> This may seem to indicate some measure of disappointment that a preferred means has not been available. But when this is the situation, the operation is marked by all deliberation and calculation so that the rational factors might be brought to prevail.<sup>18</sup> It goes without saying that these rational factors are those that are spiritually-rational, and not merely of 'natural' inclination. It is noteworthy that the two methods of making a sound decision (third time) are themselves different in spirit, although they both emphasize the operations of reason and will. The first is more abstract than the second; it is more open and balanced to either possibility, while still demanding complete honesty. The second method is, even with complete rationality, more weighted towards the affective:

Rule i: The love that is the motive inspiring this decision must be that higher love, deriving from the love of God. Hence in making my decision, I must keep clearly in view the idea that any attraction I may have for the thing in question, be it strong or weak, is simply for the sake of my Creator and Lord.<sup>19</sup>

Then Ignatius applies three sorts of consideration which may be described as ideal viewpoints: my advice to the man unknown to me, my foreseen judgment at the time of my death as to the decision which I might have now made, and how I would like to stand in the day of judgment in relation to this decision. These considerations seem to prejudge the issue to some extent, or perhaps it is only that they give a cutting edge to what otherwise might be an overly rationalized approach. Since the considerations are set within the love motive, it would seem that Ignatius is here consciously correcting various known and perceived emotional drives and aversions.

<sup>17</sup> Rickaby, Joseph: *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola* (London, 1915), p 153; Exx 178.

<sup>18</sup> Exx 179-82.

<sup>19</sup> Exx 184.

But neither of these two methods are complete without their being brought before God for his ratification in earnest prayer.<sup>20</sup> It is difficult to see how the decision thus arrived at can be known to be ratified without some form of spiritual movement, and thus the 'spiritual rationality' will in all probability be itself subjected to discernment of spirits.

At the same time, we know from the Directory of 1599 that the two methods of the third time may be used to confirm and establish a choice that has been made in the second time.<sup>21</sup> But what if the decision taken in the second time is different from that arrived at by the spiritual-rational process? We are advised to have recourse yet again to each of these processes, spiritual discernment and right reason, and ultimately to go along with that which makes the stronger case.<sup>22</sup> If the decision reached by spiritual discernment is through the good spirit, there can be no objection to submitting it to reason. The Directory rightly argues that reason is also part of God's light, and there can be no conflict between the conclusion of reason and that of spiritual discernment, for truth cannot conflict with truth.<sup>23</sup> This invitation to submit spiritual movements which lead to choice to further rational test is far-reaching. What would happen if part of the rational test were to be a psychological investigation of the hidden sources of our affectivity? Would this have the result of destroying or calling into question the contribution of affectivity to the making of christian choices? The difficulty is real, and there are some who would almost completely discount any affectivity in spiritual decisions or even in prayer-life as being so deeply conditioned by psychological forces that it is safer to disregard them totally, and this especially if the affective response is strong.

St Ignatius distinguishes two possibilities:

Spiritual comfort with no previous occasion giving rise to it comes from our Lord God alone. . . . 'With no previous occasion' means without any preceding awareness or knowledge of anything which might induce such comfort in the soul, by means of its own acts of intellect and will;<sup>24</sup>

but if there has been some occasion:

a sense of comfort may be produced in the soul either by the good angel or the bad one, though with opposing ends in view.<sup>25</sup>

Hence the occasion is something other than the direct divine intervention; Ignatius seems to establish as the test of what is without

<sup>20</sup> Exx 183.

<sup>21</sup> 'Directorium 1599', in *Exercitia Spiritualia S Ignatis de Loyola et eorum Directoria* (Madrid, 1919), cap. XXVIII, 5, pp 1160-1.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 9, pp 1161-2. <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* pp 1160-1. <sup>24</sup> Exx 330. <sup>25</sup> Exx 331.



occasion a reflex conscious awareness of what the intellect and will have done or contributed. But the real difficulty is this: the simple fact that we are unaware of what the occasion was does not mean that there was not a contribution from the depths of the psyche. This is a valid criticism; but its force is merely to put less emphasis upon the direct spiritual comfort, and more upon that which is occasioned. It would not of itself mean anything very destructive to authentic spiritual movements; but it would mean that very great attention should be given to the further norms for discernment. There is no reason to think that God does not use hidden psychological occasions for his movements of consolation; in fact, there is much reason to think that this is what happens. But Ignatius stresses that consolation from occasioned sources must be most carefully watched as they develop into act or operation because of the possibility of deception.<sup>26</sup>

There are two sides to this teaching: first, there is the obvious prudent reservation, that since one is reasonably sure that even spiritual affectivity is very largely occasioned, it is important to see how the movement works out in practice, whether it is good and sound throughout or less than that; secondly, even although one is not and cannot be sure of the complex psychological origins of the occasion, if the total process is sound in its beginning, its middle and its outcome, there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the spiritual movement or to refrain from using it in the process of christian choosing. Thus Ignatius cannot be accused of offering an anachronistic doctrine which is no longer valid in the light of modern psychology. On the contrary, it is surprising that his doctrine on discernment is so accurately safeguarded and nuanced that without any forced contrivance or forfeiting its own structure, it can square with modern psychological findings.

It must be allowed, however, that in order to know 'the course our thoughts take terminates in something bad or distracting or an end less good than that which was the soul's previous intention', and hence to be able to decide that the movement is not of the good spirit, there must be an effective set of standards and even firm rules. Conscience, in the ignatian scheme, is not limited to the mere avoidance of evil; in the case of decisions that are submitted to spiritual discernment, it is the judgment of personal and practical response to what is presented as better. Here again it must be recalled that Ignatius sets discernment within an organic structure. It would be interesting to investigate in detail whether eventually he tests the structure by the spirits or the

<sup>26</sup> Exx 331-5.

spirits by the structure; but the structure in question is primarily an internal and spiritual one, in which he is totally opposed to dishonesty and selfishness:

Everyone must bear in mind that progress in every department of the spiritual life will be proportionate to the degree in which he gives up self-love, self-seeking, and self-interest.<sup>27</sup>

From this it is clear that the self-indulgent and permissive conscience, in his view, has nothing whatever to do with spiritual living. This is not an easy standard to live by — we like to think that to err morally is human. Here however, Ignatius is concerned with man's capacity for self-sacrifice; more positively he is setting out conditions for the free play of spiritual affectivity; thirdly, if the process were to work out in a cold, enclosed sourness, in hardness and bitterness, or in any other joyless state, it would obviously fail the test of discernment by outcome; and finally, the best commentary upon the authentic meaning of this principle of self-renunciation is ignatian discretion, as found in the Constitutions and in his letters; and discretion is surely the habitual use of discernment.

It has been said with reason that the tendency to make frequent elections in the formal sense is a mark of scrupulosity. But for the ordinary course of living it is equally necessary to take one's orientations upon the important choices of one's life. Within the context of such major elections, there are surely very many smaller ones. Ideally, there should be a progressive development of almost spontaneous, as distinct from automatic, discernment. It seems clear that there is an increasing tendency to claim that discernment has been exercised, when all that has happened is that individuals or groups or Institutes have made decisions. It may be going outside our brief to observe that there seems to be a good deal of desolation about; but this is also a means for us to guide ourselves by God's leading. It would be puerile, rather than discerning, to account for this by the facile comment that 'sadness is of Satan'. Ignatius was not just whistling in the dark. But in his contribution to the reform of the Church he began with individual persons under God, setting his hopes upon God's leading the whole person to his service, and refusing an inadequate explanation of this leading. He believes that God leads the whole man, not just the soul of man and not simply through his reason but also through his affective nature. And man can know that he is being led as man — if he is willing to respond with exacting generosity and honesty.

<sup>27</sup> Exx 189.