PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS OF CHRISTIAN CHOICE

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A QUESTION may be asked about the many who have made the Spiritual Exercises in their entirety (including the Election) and who do not persevere in the choice made. Throughout this paper we have in mind not merely those who formally abandon the chosen way of life, but also those who effectively abandon their ideals without formally renouncing their vocation. Examples of both come all too easily to mind; and in the case of some who abandon a chosen way of life even after many years, the question is a crucial one. Unless one is prepared to attribute all these instances sheerly to malice or negligence, which would obviously be facile in the extreme, then one must think in terms of latent flaws in the vocational decisions of many who fail to persevere. The general ideas proposed here are offered as a tentative investigation into such latent weaknesses. The thesis of this paper can be briefly stated: the contribution of depth-psychology, with its notions of the sub-conscious and pre-conscious, is of great value concerning the existence of what Ignatius called inordinate attachments, and points up the difficulty and delicacy of their recognition and their conquest.

First of all, in the context of the ignatian election, I would like to recall the words of the Directory of 1599:

> In all the Exercises there is no subject more difficult, or one calling for greater deftness and spiritual discretion, than that of Election. It is a time when the soul is liable to a diversity of movements, and often even of illusion, when a man is overcome not only by evil, but is frequently deceived by the appearance of right and good.[1]

St Ignatius himself opens wide the door for further discussion about delusions in our choice of vocation:

> If the choice has not been made as it should have been and with due order, that is, if it was not made without inordinate attachments, one should be sorry for this, and take care to live well in the life he has chosen. Since such a choice was inordinate and awry, it does not seem to be a vocation from God, as many erroneously believe.[2]

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[1] I have used the English Province translation of the 1599 Directory: *Directory to the Spiritual Exercises of our Holy Father Ignatius* (London, 1925), ch 22, no 1.

[2] Exx 172.

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Thus the rubrics under which we shall consider psychological problems in christian choice are precisely those inordinate attachments of which Ignatius speaks. In psychological terms, an inordinate attachment is 'an emotional attachment, an emotional responsiveness which has escaped the effective control of ego-systems'.[3] In order to understand what this implies, it is necessary to examine more closely the nature of an emotional attachment or emotional responsiveness.[4]

The psychological problem of christian choice has its roots in man's unique capacity of making two concurrent appraisals of 'objects'. A dog is not faced with any psychological problem when confronted with alternatives, though he often has to choose. Man's most spontaneous appraisal of any object, be it an abstract ideal or any concrete reality, is intuitive and immediate. Intuitive appraisal occurs when something is perceived, immediately and without reflection, as good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, for me here and now, in such a way that an emotion is directly aroused. This is not the same as simple perception, which may be neutral from an emotional point of view; it involves perception in a particular way, as pleasant or unpleasant for me here and now. The process by which we estimate whether a thing is harmful or good for us is as direct and intuitive as the way in which sensory data are organized in perception.[5] Arnold defines emotion as 'the felt tendency towards anything intuitively appraised as good (beneficial) or away from anything intuitively appraised as bad (harmful)'.[6]

As well as intuitive appraisal, man has the unique capacity of making a reflective appraisal, which in the adult and older child generally follows the intuitive appraisal. In reflective appraisal, the object of the intuitive appraisal — including the emotion following it — is examined in a wider context, in the light of other knowledge and of reflective attitudes and values. This judgment, therefore, is able to transcend the here and now, and such judgments or appraisals can, and I would say in the context of the Second Week hopefully do, arouse uniquely human emotions. One of the consequences of the possibility of reflective appraisal is that one does not have to be a slave of one's immediate emotional responses. However, a complete reflective review of the

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[3] Cf Meissner, W. W. S.J.: 'Psychological Notes on the Spiritual Exercises', in *Woodstock Letters*, 92 (1963), pp 349-66; and 93 (1964), pp 31-58, 165-91.

[4] In making this analysis, I have been helped by: Arnold, M. B.; *Emotion and Personality* (New York, 1960), vol 1; Rulla, Luigi M. S.J.: *Depth Psychology and Vocation* (Chicago, 1971); Rokeach, M.: 'The nature of attitudes', in *Beliefs, Attitudes and Values: a Theory of Organization and Change* (San Francisco, 1968), p 109-32.

[5] Arnold, *op. cit.*, pp 177.

[6] *Ibid.*, p 182.

intuitive appraisal is possible only when the process involved in the intuitive appraisal is fully understood by the individual. But this is not always the case, and indeed is hard to arrive at, because of the formation of emotional attitudes. In Arnold's words: 'Any intuitive appraisal, once made, brings with it the expectation that this object, and all other members of the class to which it belongs, will be good (or bad) for all time to come'.[7] Or, in another place, we are warned by the same author of the possible harmful effects of intense emotion in early childhood, 'because the expectation it creates cannot easily be corrected by a rational estimate'.[8] Yet more important in our context is her finding that 'each emotion facilitates the experience and expression of that emotion, and eventually results in a stable emotional attitude'.[9]

In other words, a present intuitive appraisal will often not be a simple response to a present object (all the while remembering that an object here includes abstract ideals as well as material objects); much of its force may come from the past. Indeed what is appraised in this basic intuitive appraisal depends as much or more on memory and imagination as it does on the here and now experience.[10] The importance of affective memory, as distinct from visual or auditory or any other modality-specific memory, can scarcely be exaggerated. Thus this basic intuitive appraisal is strongly influenced and at times even determined by affective memory. For example, the child that has been bitten by a dog may avoid dogs for a long time, whether he recalls the incident later or not. In other words, 'affective memory' (which seems to consist of all of one's emotional attitudes) can persist even after 'modality-specific memory' has lapsed. This means that emotional attitudes can outlive the memory of the occurrences that led to their formation. 'Since affective memory is a reliving of the original acceptance or rejection in a new though similar situation, the resulting feeling carries no dateline: we are often completely unaware that our here and now appraisal is really prejudgment (literally a prejudice) dictated by affective memory'. As Arnold puts it:

> Indeed affective memory is ubiquitous yet intensely personal because it is the living record of the emotional life-history of each person. Being always at our disposal, playing an important role in the appraisal and interpretation of everything around us, it can be called the matrix of all experience and action, as Klages and Krueger have seen. But it is also the intensely personal reaction to a particular situation, based on an individual's unique experiences and biases.[11]

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[7] *Ibid.*, p 184. [8] *Ibid.*, p 185. [9] *Ibid.*, p 186.

[10] Cf Arnold, M. B.: 'Perennial Problems in the Field of Emotion', in *Feelings and Emotions* (New York, 1970), p 176 ff. [11] *Ibid.*, p 177.

The conclusion is striking: this 'matrix of all experience and action' has been formed by events which the individual has largely forgotten. It seems to follow that it would be quite possible for the individual not to understand fully his own emotional attitudes; and hence that his reflective appraisals will not always be able properly to correct his intuitive appraisals. A few examples of such emotional attitudes may help to illustrate this point. The individual who felt deprived of parental affection as a young child may come to feel unconscious resentment towards his parents, which will carry over, unknown to him, towards all persons whom he perceives as parental figures or persons in authority. The emotional habitual disposition of such a person may well be one of feeling continuously dominated by others: a feeling which, though unconscious, may in turn lead him to disguise it by attempting to dominate others. Or again, the child whose need for succour or affection has been over-indulged may grow up with an exaggerated need for intimacy and succour, and this he may disguise from himself by adopting the attitude of the cool, independent, go-it-alone person or the over-dependent, affectively hungry adult. The important point here is that many persons fail to recognize such emotional attitudes, which are deep-set, pervasive in all areas of their life, disguised to avoid recognition and hence not open to correction by reflective appraisal.

The problem is further complicated by the individual's capacity for unconsciously disguising infantile emotional attitudes in order to save his self-esteem. Indeed, defence-mechanisms can succeed in hiding unpleasant aspects of oneself only if the functioning of the defences is itself outside consciousness: for example, exaggerated dependency-needs may be disguised as the desire to be of service to others; or again the individual with an unconscious need for aggression may disguise this by presenting himself as the smiling, gentle, never-a-harsh-word kind of person.

Let us return now to the ignatian concept of inordinate attachments. One could have the impression that all inordinate affections are easily identified by anyone who gives himself to serious reflection; such attachments are often thought of in terms of specific and easily recognized objects; and it is presumed that overcoming them is simply a matter of being willing to pay the ascetical price involved. Such cases do exist; and the effort required by the subject in recognizing and coping effectively with such attachments should not be underestimated.

There exists, however, a further cluster of problems which forms the main topic of this paper. The problems are concerned with what we

may call vocational consistency and inconsistency; and here a word of explanation is called for. We may consider the whole person as divided into ideal self and actual self.[12] The *ideal self* has two components: the beliefs he has of what others expect from him, together with his own ideals or what he himself would like to be or do. His *actual self* likewise has two components of significance here: first, those characteristics which an individual knows and admits he has; and secondly those characteristics which he actually possesses, though he may not be aware of them. Even from this very sketchy outline it may be easier to see the possibility of agreement or discrepancy between the ideal self and the actual self, between what a person would like to be and what he actually is. When he is motivated by conscious or sub-conscious needs which are not in accordance with these ideals there is inconsistency. It should be evident that not all the possible consistencies and inconsistencies are of equal relevance here. For example, the case of the person who knows the values of married life and also of the celibate life but is rationally uncertain which are the better, is not as serious as the case of the person who knows the values of the celibate life but who follows that way of life through being motivated by an unconscious and exaggerated need of succour. In the latter case, what the individual consciously proclaims as an important value for him is a poor reflection of his basic motivational forces.

Another example may illustrate this point. An individual may decide to get married, proclaiming the value of married life and fatherhood, but be moved to choose marriage by an unconscious emotional need to exercise domination over those in his care. Rulla cites an example which is not too uncommon: 'One can consciously stress poverty in the form of social concern (to help the poor) as a subsconscious means to gratify a defensive nurturance, that is, a subconscious need to give in order to get. In the last instance, however, it is possible for the individual to be responsive to *inconsistency without being aware of it*'.[13]

Let me state clearly once and for all that we are not calling into question the 'good intentions' of the individual. That said, however, we must insist that, just as sincerity requires one to consider the consequences of an act as part of one's intending, so does sincerity in christian choice presuppose at least a general willingness to know more about oneself and one's hidden resistances to the gospel (or in ignatian terms, one's inordinate attachments, or in psychological terms one's subconscious inconsistencies) as part of the concern for

[12] Cf Rulla. *op. cit.*, p 36 ff. [13] *Ibid.*, p 60.

one's ability to fulfil the choice made. From the Annotations we can see that Ignatius is not concerned with the mere making of a choice. He is much more concerned with the retreatant's capacity for putting this choice into effect: 'It is necessary to consider with great care the condition and endowments of each individual, and the help or hindrance he would experience in carrying out his promises'.[14]

Let us focus our attention for a moment on the person who wishes to follow the ignatian method for making a choice. Ignatius presupposes such a person to be free from inordinate attachments. The Directory of 1599 is yet more explicit:

> Thirdly, it is highly expedient that anyone about to enter on Election should strive to be free from all inordinate affection, and become utterly indifferent towards everything; with just the one inclination to do God's holy will, whatever it be ascertained to be. . . . He must therefore acquire the third degree of humility or at least the second. . . . Should he ultimately fail to reach the resignation and indifference described, all mention of election must be dropped.[15]

The question must now be asked about the individual who is responsive to a vocational inconsistency without being aware of it. The possibility of persons acting unknowingly in ways which are inconsistent with their christian vocation, or inconsistent with the values of a particular vocation as a christian, sheds new light on the meaning of the ninth Annotation and reveals some serious problems. Ignatius mentions here three ways of being grossly and openly tempted:

> The thought of hardships, feeling ashamed, wondering what people will think about him, etc. The Exercitant who is thus tempted should not be given the rules of the second week.[16]

This would seem to correspond to what we have called a conscious inconsistency, and according to the Directory there should be no thought of election.

What of the exercitant with an unconscious inconsistency? Such a person will be tempted under the appearance of good, but — and this is where depth-psychology may help us to understand the latent flaws of vocational choices — he will fail to learn from his own experience. He may be highly intelligent, be fully conversant with the rules for the discernment of spirits, and yet remain 'a person unskilled in spiritual things'. In actual life he will continue to be 'driven' by his subconscious needs, he will continue to hide those needs from himself and many others by a variety of defence-mechanisms: for example, denial, projection,

[14] Exx 14. [15] Directory, ch 23, no 3. [16] Exx 9.

reaction-formation, compensation, displacement, rationalization and so on. These defences are strong and are not overcome easily, because, as we have said above, they are not recognized; in psychological terms, they are ego-syntonic.

It may be said that following a vocation is an implementation of the self-ideal in a given situation. This includes two components: the ideals the person has for himself, and the ideals of the situation or institution as they are perceived by the individual. It is important to note that here the subject is central; and this self-ideal-in-situation will remain the psychological pivot of his future life and vocation, only if it is objective and free: that is, not the projection to the ideal self of conflicting needs of the actual self. We may say that it is objective, when the content corresponds to the essential ideals proposed by any given situation or institution; and that it is free, as long as its content is not the consequence of some underlying subconscious conflicts which 'drive' the individual, or force his motivation.

From the psychological point of view, research has shown that we can enumerate four different sources of interference with the objectivity and freedom of the individual's self-ideal-in-situation, and therefore with the objectivity and freedom with what has been called the psychological pivot of his life.[17] These sources are: 1. Lack of knowledge concerning the ideals of the way of life. 2. Identification with the vocational institution. In other words, because of his desires to identify with the vocational setting under consideration, he will tend to project these desires onto the institution. Thus he mistakenly perceives the ideals of an institution (for example, married life or priesthood) as quite similar to his own ideals. 3. The influence of intra-psychic conflicts or inconsistencies. 4. Pressure from the group, styles of leadership and the institutional structure.

It is important to note that not all these sources of interference are of equal gravity. The first two, lack of knowledge and non-defensive identification, do not cause such significant conflict between the individual's ideal self and actual self. In terms of the Exercises, I would consider the Principle and Foundation as being of *potentially* great value in overcoming the first source of interference: lack of knowledge concerning the christian ideal. Similarly, the meditations on the Kingdom, the Two Standards, and the Three Classes of Men *may* help in overcoming any non-defensive indentification.

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[17] I rely here on the results of research undertaken by members of the staff of the Institute of Psychology, Gregorian University, Rome. Their findings will be published in the near future.

However, the third source of interference is not so easily recognized, and is certainly much more difficult to overcome. Here the conflict between the ideal self and the actual self is more deep-set, and as such may not be conscious. As we saw above, the person involved in choosing a way of life may be moved to follow a vocation partly to defend himself against or to gratify underlying subconscious needs, which are less acceptable as a conscious ideal. Therein lies the conflict. An inconsistency or conflict would be present between the exercitant's self-ideal-in-situation and his actual self. Now conflict arising between ideal self and our actual self is no discovery of depth-psychology. St Paul describes it well when he says:

> I cannot understand my own behaviour. I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and I find myself doing the very things I hate.[18]

Such conflict is part of man's fallen nature — however one wishes to describe this in theological terms. What is of greater interest and significance for us here is the psychological fact that the inconsistency or conflict between the individual's ideal self and his rather subconscious actual self, induces more anxiety and defensiveness than the inconsistency between the same ideal self and the more conscious actual self. In a word, inconsistencies or conflicts which are determined by subconscious needs incompatible with christian values or the values of a particular vocation, render the free choice of that vocation and the implementation of that choice well-nigh impossible. Returning to the original question posed at the beginning of this paper, it may be possible to understand better how the same subconscious conflictual needs which lead an individual to follow a certain vocation can easily lead to his abandoning it when such needs are not gratified.

We turn now to consider briefly the three 'times' for making a sound election proposed by St Ignatius.[19] The first 'time' would appear to be a less frequent occurrence. It would not be fruitful to debate its frequency here. Suffice it to say that St Ignatius cites two rather extraordinary examples, and any director would need to know well the dispositions of the exercitant (for example, his freedom from inordinate attachment, or, in the psychological terminology employed here, from subconscious inconsistencies) before allowing him to proceed to any definitive choice of vocation.

The second 'time' is more ordinary. A full treatment of the discernment of spirits from the psychological point of view is outside

[18] Rom 7, 15.
[19] Exx 175-8.

our scope. However, certain problems concerning consolation and desolation emerge in view of what we have said about the possibility of subconscious inconsistencies. That consolation and desolation are states of affectivity is beyond doubt. To stop short with that is perhaps the greatest hazard of the Exercises today. As Buckley so clearly demonstrates: 'Consolation and desolation do not identify necessarily with pleasure and pain'.[20] Further, I am in full agreement with him when he says that the criteria in the first week and in the second are almost opposite to each other. Affectivity in the first week is judged by its obvious direction: consolation, if it leads to God, desolation, if it leads away from God. However, when we come to the second week, 'the apparent moral worth of what is proposed is — at its beginning — beyond cavil; but its real worth is judged by affectivity, by one's feelings of peace and joy. Mix these up and you have a monster on your hands'.[21] Now, from the psychological point of view, it makes all the difference in the world what 'week' the exercitant finds himself in predominantly — and this may have little or nothing to do with time as such. This is no place for drawing neat lines between weeks: Ignatius provides rules 'more suited for the first week', and 'more suited for the second week'. The assumption that an exercitant can pass readily and completely from relying on the rules for the first week to relying on the rules for the second week appears extreme. In a certain sense, the christian remains always engaged in the struggle associated more clearly with the first week. To this extent he must always attend to the direction in which his emotions carry him.

As to the exercises of the second week, the challenge of the Two Standards implies a continual struggle with at least some aspects of one's emotional life. While the question of movement towards God, growth in the likeness of Christ or whatever you want to call it, could raise practically every question in spirituality, at least this much can be said in the present context: that it must include a continual struggle with, and renunciation of, infantile or self-centred emotional needs. In ignatian language it must include the continual effort to become free and remain free from disordered attachment, to be received and to remain under the Standard of Christ. In other words, there remains the cross to be carried daily. It follows that in the second week as well, consolation and desolation do not identify simply with pleasure and pain.

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[20] Buckley, Michael: 'Rules for the Discernment of Spirits', in *Supplement to the Way*, 20 (1973), p 29.

[21] *Ibid.*, p 35.

The issue is further complicated by the fact that inordinate attachments in the sense of deep-seated emotional attitudes may be perceived by the individual dimly or not at all; and may be producing a subtle distortion in a whole life-style, rather than inclining the individual towards some specific 'forbidden fruits' or lesser good. I agree with Buckley when he says: 'Only when affectivity is ordered can it in turn become the clue to the direction in which one should go within the myriad good options which surround one's life'.[22] However, the ideas presented here imply that the words 'only when affectivity is ordered' state a condition which is extremely hard to meet, and imply further that it will very rarely be prudent to take affective states as the *sole* criterion for any important choices.

It can be pointed out in very general terms that similar problems attach to the third time for making an election. The conditions stated by Ignatius, namely the free and peaceful use of the natural powers of the soul, is also seen to be difficult to meet. The possibility was earlier indicated that the ideals one adopts with respect to a specific way of life can be influenced and contaminated by subconscious needs inconsistent with these same ideals. This is particularly liable to take the form of exaggerated or unrealistic expectations of satisfaction in the chosen way of life. It seems reasonable to suppose that it is precisely the experience of frustration, when these exaggerated expectations are not fulfilled, that leads to many people abruptly changing their vocational status by laicization, divorce and so on, in a way that often takes acquaintances by surprise: the very problem that was indicated at the beginning of this paper.

From what I have said, it may seem that I am totally sceptical of the role of affectivity in christian living. This is far from the truth. I agree with Lonergan that feelings are the 'mass and momentum of human living', and therefore also of christian living. Harmony between one's emotions and one's christian ideals is something greatly to be desired, as far as this can ever be achieved by fallen man. It has not been my aim to attempt to show that emotion in the ignatian election is unimportant. The force, and hence the potential constructiveness or destructiveness of emotion, has been presupposed throughout. The limited aim of this paper, as the title implies, has been to call attention, in a way that is necessarily sketchy and general, to a set of problems which arise in our efforts to channel this powerful force in a direction which is constructive in the context of christian ideals and christian choice.

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[22] *Ibid.*, p 35.