

PHILOSOPHICAL CERTITUDE AND THE IGNATIAN ELECTION

By MICHAEL SIMPSON

THE PROBLEM posed by this paper can perhaps be illustrated by citing two typical cases of christian choice which require true discernment. The first concerns a person who has been aware for some years of an inner movement or inclination towards the religious life. He has made several retreats, perhaps annually; but he cannot bring himself to make a decision to enter the religious life because he feels that the strength of his conviction or degree of certitude is insufficient for the making of an irrevocable choice. He may also find, after years of uncertainty, that the psychological difficulty remains, and is even greater; he begins to feel that he might have found peace had he made his decision at a much earlier stage. The difficulty here is that the person was looking for a degree of certitude *before* making his decision which may not have been available to him because of the very nature of the decision. The refusal to enter upon any commitment, as long as there remains some element of doubt, may itself impede a growth in conviction which may come only *after* the decision has been taken in faith, on the basis of the present clarity of discernment.

Our second case concerns the person who has doubts about his present commitment to the religious life. He tries as sincerely as possible to discover God's will, and eventually makes the decision to leave his order. After some time he discovers that he has lost his peace of mind: he recognizes that his decision to leave, though he still believes that it was an honest one, was lacking in depth of discernment. He was too much influenced by his immediate feelings. The difficulty here is that his feelings, which he took to be the outcome of a discernment process, were not sufficiently tested. He had made his decision *before* reaching the degree of certitude necessary for so serious a choice.

Hence the questions: what degree of certitude, what strength of conviction, should one seek before coming to a decision involving total commitment? How does one know when one is possessed of that necessary degree of certitude?

The first point to be noted is that Ignatius's three 'times' of election are not moments or situations clearly distinct from one another.

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Spiritual discernment, listed by Paul amongst a whole range of spiritual gifts,¹ may be experienced in varying degrees of compulsion, between the 'extremes' of the first and third times. Nor is the second time an exactly defined moment providing a clear alternative to the other times; rather it expresses the normal situation in which a christian will come to a decision, and in which varying degrees of discernment may be manifested. The second time will, moreover, presuppose and incorporate those basic dispositions which are appropriate to the other times.

The first time is one in which a person experiences God's call in a way that apparently leaves no room for doubt. Ignatius recognized the conversion of Paul and the call of Matthew as examples of this. The third time is one in which a person experiences no inner movement or discernment at all; he simply weighs up with his reason the factors for and against the decision. It seems clear that Ignatius did not regard these two times as the normal occasions for serious christian choice. The normal situation is one lying somewhere between these 'extremes'. Certainly there must be that basic openness in God's presence which is the prerequisite of the first time (which is all we can bring to the first time); and there must also be that inner tranquillity of mind and heart which is the prerequisite of the third time. But granted these dispositions, Ignatius expects that the normal situation or 'time' in which a christian should make a decision is one where he does experience some inner movement or sensitivity — the 'material' of his discernment of God's will in the matter. The strength of these 'movements' given in the second time can vary from the complete compulsion of the discernment in the first time and the lack of any inner movement of spirit in the third time.

It is helpful here to consider the analogy of a human relationship. The more deeply we grow in love for another human person, the more we will acquire the sensitivity enabling us to recognize what is in conformity with that love and what might be in disharmony or conflict with it. This is a gift of discernment which naturally accompanies the gift of love. The same is true in the christian life of prayer. The more a person comes to have a real inner awareness of God in his life of prayer, the greater the inner sensitivity or discernment he will acquire, in order to recognize what is in harmony with his relationship with God and whatever is in tension or conflict with it. The gift of discernment, to some degree, is the normal consequence of any christian life of prayer.

¹ Cf 1 Cor 12, 4-11.

There are those who experience the gift in a more remarkable way. The Curé of Ars, for example, seems to have been able to discern the spiritual condition of penitents in a way that went beyond any possible powers of human insight. But all christians should expect to experience in faith the gift of discernment to some degree through a life of prayer, even if this may not lead to a conviction that would remove all room for doubt or uncertainty.

The philosophical discussion about degrees of certitude has generally been directed towards a kind of knowledge that comes from the standpoint of a detached observer: what Kierkegaard would refer to as 'objective knowledge', where what is known may be studied and analysed as an object of experience. Within this context, a distinction is made between 'prudential' or 'moral' certitude, and 'legitimate' certitude. The former applies where there are good grounds for believing the truth of some proposition, but where the evidence is not absolutely compelling — there is some possibility of being mistaken. With legitimate certitude, the evidence is completely compelling: for example, in the analytic statements of logic or mathematics, given certain axioms; or in factual statements, such as 'this is a typewriter on my desk', given conventional meanings. In such cases there is no room for doubt.

What kind of certitude is appropriate to the kind of knowledge or belief proper to the making of decisions or acts of personal commitment? Because the person making the decision is not a detached observer, but the subject involved in the commitment whose authenticity he is seeking to determine, the mode of certitude proper to such a decision cannot be defined in terms appropriate to the 'objective knowledge' of a detached observer. Instead, certain criteria for a 'subjective certitude', proper to the subject involved in the decision-making, have to be found. Nor will these criteria ever make possible an 'objective certainty': one that can be demonstrated outside of the act of commitment itself. It follows, then, that if a person wishing to make a truly christian choice is looking for objective certainty, he will never arrive at the proper decision.

The analogy with a human relationship may again be helpful. We do not have a complete intellectual grasp of the reality of another person: there is a mystery or depth in the life of every human being which cannot be observed as an 'object' of experience. However, as a relationship between persons grows and develops, one may come to a 'subjective certitude' of the love of the other person for oneself: a certitude which is capable of growth. At the early stages in the relationship, there may

be room for doubt and question. But through mutual growth and commitment, the subjective certitude can become so compelling that it leaves no real room for doubt, however indemonstrable its truth may be from the outside, from an objective standpoint. The subject's awareness of love disclosed through mutual commitment is itself the sufficient verification for the subjective certitude which is needed.

The subject can only come to this mode of certitude if there has been a moment in the developing relationship when there has been a mutual yielding to each other. He cannot wait until he has an objective certainty of the other person's love before undertaking any act of commitment towards him, because by doing so love could never grow between them, and no degree of 'subjective certitude' could ever be attained. The human person is capable of indefinite growth; and the relationships by which he grows are not between static realities that can be defined from the outside. Each person will, through relationship, grow in the reality of what he is and what he can become. The subjective certitude of the relationship of love between persons always remains open to new possibilities of growth. Personal commitment demands openness to a future that is objectively uncertain. But it is only by undertaking that commitment that a subjective certainty of mutual love can be established and deepen.

All this is especially true in man's relationship with God. God is a mystery; he cannot in any way be grasped by the intellect as an 'object of experience'. God cannot be known from a detached, observational standpoint; hence he cannot be affirmed with an 'objective certitude', in the sense in which we have defined it. God can be known only from within a subjective relationship; and this necessarily involves commitment. There is no aspect or element of God which could be known as an 'object'. Any true awareness of God can be disclosed only through an authentic relationship, in which the human self stands before the Infinite who is Love: Love who calls for a totality of commitment and self-surrender. For this reason, the only certitude proper to man's knowledge of God can be a 'subjective certitude', which comes through that act of commitment and self-surrender.

This is not to deny that one can *reflect* upon the truth disclosed through this act of subjective commitment, and express that truth in propositional terms. But the certitude of doctrines of faith can only come from within the awareness of each subject, through his personal commitment. One may give an intellectual assent to such doctrines on grounds of authority; but as long as they are approached from a detached or 'objective' standpoint, there will always remain some degree of uncertainty,

because objectively the evidence is never compelling. Truths of faith express what can never become an object of experience. It is only when these truths are appropriated within the subjective commitment of the believer that they can be affirmed with a subjective certitude — one which comes from an inner conviction which is the work of the holy Spirit within each person.

As in human relationships, this subjective certitude is capable of growth; not because, in this case, there is any possibility of growth in God, but because each person grows in his own reality as he becomes more and more open before God in the depth and totality of his commitment. At early stages of this growth there may be room, even subjectively, for uncertainty. Yet I believe that there can come a significant moment or time of growth in the yielding of each person to God's Spirit, when that subjective uncertainty gives way to a completely compelling conviction of the living reality of God, and of his unlimited love for oneself and for each person. This is the essential mystery of Pentecost as it enters into the life of every christian. I believe that just as the mysteries of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ are in a certain sense renewed or made present in the life of each christian, the same is meant to be true of the mystery of Pentecost. The promise of Jesus to send the Spirit to his followers,² to lead them 'to the complete truth', is a promise to give them that inner conviction of his own living presence and that of his Father which leaves no room for subjective doubt. And this, I believe, is what we see happening in the lives of the disciples at Pentecost,³ and which is still taking place in the lives of many christians today, whether it takes place in moments of sudden growth or in a more gradual deepening of the Spirit in one's life. We should expect in faith to come to a stage of growth in our christian life when, by yielding to the gift of God's Spirit, we come to have a deep inner awareness of Jesus, and through Jesus of the Father, and of their working in and through our lives, so that we can rightly claim a complete subjective certitude. Until this happens there will always remain some room for doubt.

It is within the context of this subjective certitude of the reality and love of God that the question of the discernment of particular calls in response to God's love can arise: that the spiritual gift of discernment can be manifested. I may have a complete certainty of the reality of God's love for me, and that he calls me to a total commitment to himself,

² Cf Jn 14, 16-17. 26; 15, 26; 16, 7-14.

³ Cf Acts 2.

and at the same time be uncertain about what his love demands of me in my particular situation. This is why we need the gift of discernment.

This gift, as I suggested above, is capable of being experienced in different degrees. There is, however, a danger of our expectation in faith being too limited. Our model here, as in every aspect of the christian life, is Christ himself. Jesus is manifested in the gospels as a man perfectly in tune with the will of his Father at every moment. After his baptism in the Jordan, he is clearly led by the Spirit, so that he can discern his Father's will with confidence in every situation. He could act with assurance and authority, knowing that the Father was with him in everything he did.

No christian would lay claim to this same degree of discernment in following the Father's will. Nevertheless I have met some christians, and we have probably all had this experience, who have manifested something of that inner assurance and conviction in their living out of God's will. They show a sense of authority which does not come from anything external, but from an inner discernment or spiritual sensitivity, simply from living deeply in the Spirit, in the mystery of Christ. This sense of assurance has been accompanied by a peace and gentleness that completely excluded any self-centredness or arrogance. Indeed, the gift of discernment or authority is not the person's *possession*, about which he could become self-centred, but is present to the degree of self-effacement and self-abandonment to the work of the Spirit in his life in a free and unimpeded way.

This, I believe, is both a possibility and a call offered to every christian. We are all called to that depth of life in the Spirit where we shall 'know the things of the Father' with a quiet and self-effacing confidence. But it is a matter of growth. Most of us still have our vision obscured by areas of self-seeking and possessiveness in our lives. It is only as these are gradually purified and healed that our sensitivity to God's call can become clearer. It is possible for us to make mistakes, and to act in ways that are not following the lead of God's Spirit. This is why we need certain criteria for testing the spirit that we are moved to follow.

I do not suggest that we need to invoke certain criteria *explicitly* every time we make some self-involving decision in our christian life. There is a danger of excessive analysis that can be paralysing: there should be a certain spontaneity and freedom in our lives. But I suggest that the following criteria would normally be operative implicitly in our coming to an important decision, and can be reflected upon and made explicit insofar as the need should arise.

General criteria

1. Is the inspiration or movement within me in conformity with God's word in scripture? If the gift of discernment is to grow within us, it is vital that it be firmly grounded in a knowledge of God's word. To one who possesses this knowledge, there will be a spontaneous sensitivity to what is in harmony with that word, and what is not. God's movement within the life of the individual will never conflict with his self-revelation to us in the Incarnate Word.
2. Is there a conformity with the orthodox tradition and teaching of the Church: that is, of the christian community, past and present? This would include not simply the defined teaching of the Church but that *sensus fidelium* — the living tradition of God's people, wherever they are to be found. This itself, evidently, would require discernment; so that this criterion could not be taken in isolation from the others. But the claim to experience some movement of the spirit which one senses to be in conflict with this living tradition should lead one seriously to question the source of that movement.
3. Does the movement of the spirit within me harmonize with my existing commitments? If one has already undertaken a life-commitment in good faith and in response to God's call, it would, I believe, be unusual for God to make a new call in a way that would conflict with the responsibilities of that existing commitment. If a prior commitment was self-centred, God may move in a way that would uproot a person and detach him from his self-interest. But if there has been a sincere attempt to discern God's call, one would need a very clear indication that one is now hearing a different call, especially if the previous commitment has led one into responsibilities for other persons. Here, there are also questions of obedience: of recognizing that there are situations in which the discernment of others may perhaps be a safer test of the leading of God's Spirit than the inner movements I myself experience.

Individual criteria

1. The fruits of the Spirit. These are the basic criteria considered by Ignatius in his rules for discernment. Does the inner movement lead to an increase of the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control that manifest the presence of the Spirit in a person's life?⁴ Does it lead to consolation or desolation in the sense defined by Ignatius? It is important to distinguish between a superficial

⁴ Cf Gal 5, 22-23.

peace and joy which may come simply from the satisfaction of self-centred feelings, and an authentic peace and joy centred upon the inner presence of God. This is why Ignatius has different Rules for the first and second weeks of the Exercises.⁵

2. A very important criterion concerns the person's life of prayer. If a person is devoted to a regular life of prayer, he can have much greater confidence that a persistent inner movement towards a certain call does come from God. Without a real life of prayer it would be difficult to have the same confidence. If, for example, a religious in an active order feels a call to a more contemplative form of life, it would be wise to ask whether he is using all the opportunities for prayer that exist in his present way of life. The movement he feels may simply be one to live more prayerfully in his existing commitment.

For another reason, too, prayer is important. For it will normally be within a spirit of prayer that a person will recognize whether his life is harmonizing or not with God's call. If a person can pray with complete openness and peace of heart before God, this is a good sign that his life is following the basic call of God. If he lacks a spirit of peace at prayer, it may be that there is some aspect of his life which is an obstacle to God's love and may indicate the need for some inner conversion or healing.

3. Any deep desire which is persistent within us, provided we are living a life of prayer and informed by God's word, may normally be taken as a sign of God's call, if there is no other reason to recognize that it is not. For it is the holy Spirit who forms within us our desires and longings: that is, provided they are directed towards 'everything that is true, everything that is noble, everything that is good and pure, everything that we love and honour, and everything that can be thought virtuous or worthy of praise'.⁶

These are just some of the criteria necessary for testing the spirit. We shall certainly be tempted at times; and not every movement within us is going to come from the holy Spirit. We have not yet attained that clear ability to discern God's will in every situation that would remove all possibility of following some deviant path. Nevertheless, as a person grows in the life of prayer, and in the experience of applying these criteria in different situations, he should expect in faith to grow towards

⁵ Since other articles in this Supplement consider these Rules in greater detail, I will not dwell upon them here.

⁶ Phil 4, 8.

that fulness of christian life in which there will be a greater spontaneity and freedom in responding to God's call, with a confident trust in the lead he gives.

Conclusion

There can never be a complete certainty from an *objective* standpoint of the rightness of some self-involving decision in the christian life. For the 'end' of such a decision can never be made an *object* of experience that could be demonstrated from a detached standpoint. I can never *prove* to myself or to anyone else that I have a call to a particular way of life. Objectively there will always be uncertainty. However, from within the *subjective* standpoint of the person involved in the election or decision-making, there can be a certitude of various degrees of compulsion; and this can grow and develop through the act of commitment itself. Through the gift of God's Spirit, this certitude can become totally compelling in a way that leaves no room for subjective doubt. To refuse to undertake any commitment because there is an objective uncertainty, would be to withhold oneself from the situation in which alone subjective certitude could eventually be found. We need to learn how to apply the criteria of discernment which allow decisions to be made before there is a complete certitude. But such a decision, as we move forward in faith, will open us to that growth in conviction which will be the normal fruit of God's Spirit.

Discernment is a gift of God's Spirit. It is necessary if we are to live with the confidence and freedom of God's sons. It is, I believe, offered to all in some degree, insofar as the life of Christ is present within us. 'God's gift was not a spirit of timidity, but the Spirit of power and love, and self-control'.⁷ We need to use what initial faith and discernment we have in committing ourselves to God as we discern his call, in the sure hope that it is the path to light and truth.

⁷ 2 Tim 1, 7.