

## A DISCERNMENT PROCESS BASED ON THE IGNATIAN TRADITION<sup>1</sup>

**IDENTIFY the decision that faces us or the issue we need to resolve**

**EXAMINE the underlying values (human, Christian, spiritual) and personal concerns involved**

Through reflection, we clarify the values that are at stake in the decision (values clarification) and ask whether they are worth pursuing (value critique).

**STRIVE for Ignatian indifference**

Ignatian indifference is a state of inner freedom, openness, and balance that allows us beforehand not to incline more toward one option than to another, but to allow our preference be shaped by the single criterion of what will enhance our ability to love God and to embody that love for others in the concrete context of our lives.

Not easy to attain, indifference is a poised freedom that preserves our ability to go one way or another depending on the indication of God's lead. By calling for indifference, Ignatius is calling for a willingness right from the start to be influenced in the process by God's guidance.

Unfortunately, indifference is a bad choice of a word to convey Ignatius's meaning, since it often connotes apathy and complacency. For Ignatius, it has nothing to do with the absence of feelings; nor does it mean disinterest in people and situations. The sculpture of the discus thrower is a helpful image in understanding Ignatian indifference. Manifesting taut muscles ready to be sprung and pent-up energy ready to be released, the statue captures at once the paradoxical combination of action and rest. It is as if the discus thrower has been caught at a moment when he is ready to hurl the discus but is in waiting. Similarly, Ignatian indifference calls for a spiritual posture that imitates that of the discus thrower. We are called to be ever ready to embody the love of God in any way we can, but we must have the inner discipline to wait and to withhold action until we get an indication of directionality from God.

If unable to achieve indifference, discussing the matter in spiritual direction can help us understand what we are struggling with and what the next peaceful step might be in our discernment.

**TAKE time to pray over the matter, paying attention to how we are being drawn or led**

This moves our reflection into the context of prayer; we ask for God's guidance and try to be sensitive to how we are being drawn when the matter is brought to prayer.

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<sup>1</sup> From Wilke Au and Noreen Cannon Au's *The Discerning Heart: Exploring the Christian Path*, pp. 60-65.

Here it is important to remember what was said above regarding the interplay of reason, affect, and religious experience in the decision-making process. God can influence us through our thoughts as well as through our feelings of consolation and desolation in prayer.

### **MAKE a choice based on both the results of our "head work" and our "heart work"**

"Head work" includes weighing the matter with our reasoning process by which we research the relevant information, consult with resource persons when necessary, listen to all the different aspects of our being (needs, wants, desires, and so on), and consider the pros and cons of the different options.

"Heart work" entails sitting with the choice that our reasoning has determined to be the best and checking for affective confirmation, that is, whether our feelings go along with what our mind has decided. If, over a period of time, the feelings that surround the choice we have made are predominantly enlivening and positive (Ignatian "consolation"), we can consider this a sensible way to proceed. If, however, the feelings are predominantly stifling and negative (Ignatian "desolation"), then we must keep the process open until we can arrive at a decision that head and heart can jointly embrace.

The feelings we are monitoring here are not the fleeting feelings that are our immediate responses to stimuli that impinge upon us throughout the day. That level of feelings is like the fluctuating waves on the surface of the ocean. The feelings that are relevant to this process of affective confirmation are similar to the more stable currents between the surface and bottom of the ocean. This mid level of feelings is more constant and stable and thus more relevant in determining whether our feelings confirm or call into question the decision we have made through our thinking process.

Addressing the importance of this affective confirmation, Pierre Wolff articulates a theological affirmation that is central to the Ignatian approach: "Within ourselves, by the process of discernment we offer the results of our intellectual search to the Spirit. If our Divine Guest indicates agreement with us through enlivening echoes produced at the core of our being, we may say that, at that level, we and the Spirit are in tune with one another and that we are deciding together our will. What we want at this depth is what God wants for us: God's will for us is what we decide.""

### **DISCUSS the matter with a spiritual companion**

Because discerning the movements of God can often be a complex task requiring assistance, this step calls for sharing our deliberation with a trusted friend, counselor, or minister-someone who is committed to helping us be truthful, patient, and persevering in our search for God's call. Because we are all liable to self-deception, we need help to be objective and honest.

### **DIALOGUE with those who will be intimately affected by the decision being made**

Too often decisions that affect spouses, children, and other loved ones are made unilaterally, without engaging the participation of those who have a right to be involved. These decisions, for example, may pertain to changing jobs, selling the house and moving, or caring for aging parents. It is important to make an effort whenever appropriate to ensure that important decisions are not made alone but shared with the significant people in our lives.

### **LIVE out our decision with courage, hope, and trust**

This step requires us to trust in God and to decide, even in the absence of certitude. Sometimes fears and doubts can paralyze us and cause us to procrastinate in making important decisions. As Christians we are called to live boldly and decisively. We must act, even though our carefully discerned decisions may be tinged with some uncertainty due to variables beyond our control. We are called to trust in God's power at work bringing good out of everything. As Saint Paul says in Romans, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (8:28).

It is also important to keep in mind that Ignatian consolation and desolation refer primarily to our relationship with God and should not be understood in terms of the pleasure-pain axis. Hence, a well-discerned choice can entail enduring periods of struggle and pain while at the same time be supported by a deep sense of God's presence and love.

Here we should also remember Ignatius's caveat about not making any significant decision when experiencing desolation (no. 318). For Ignatius, desolation is a time when we feel distant from God, confused and anxious. This time of darkness is not a good time to alter decisions that were freely made when in a state of consolation, a time when we experience an increase of faith, hope, love, and trust in God.