

Discerning God's Will

The expression “discerning God’s will” has been quite a household word in spiritual and religious circles and, particularly so, since the Second Vatican Council. This is not because the Council issued any particular document about discernment. Its teaching, however, as deeply rooted in Revelation, Tradition and Scripture found particularly strong inspiration in Pope John XXIII’s charismatic call to the whole Church to “read the signs of the times.”² The Council Fathers, taking to heart these prophetic words of the Lord, worked hard to discern what the Spirit of God was calling the Church to. The Vatican Council Constitutions and Decrees, being the benchmark against which to judge the reform of Catholic pastoral practice, are still urgently calling the Christian Community to shake off much dust gathered over the years and to strenuously commit to live and witness the vitality, freshness and joy of the Gospel.

Vatican II very bravely and in a spirit of faith faced the challenges of a secularist society and of a fast-changing culture that has deeply affected and swayed the lifestyle of people. Fundamental Vatican II documents such as *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Dignitatis Humanae* and *Nostra Aetate* have surely made us realize how seriously the Council took up John XXIII’s prophetic call to discern the will of God by responding to the urgent pastoral needs of the people living in modern times. This was the context that had revived the awareness and the concrete need of spiritual discernment in the Church. Faced with the new challenges of the twenty-first century, the Christian community cannot but

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² See Mt 16:3, “You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.”

commit itself seriously to spiritually discern what Christ is calling us to, the will of his Father in living the joy of love in these difficult times.

***Amoris Laetitia* and Discernment**

The following are only a few notes and reflections about the process of discerning God's will. They are hints about the main import and the art of spiritual discernment, emphasizing the conditions necessary for good discernment. I do not intend taking up any particular case for spiritual discernment. The principal framework in mind will be, however, Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* and its particular context pertaining to Christian families. More specifically and concretely, I am drawn by the Pope's words of exhortation addressed to couples who, though living in contrast with the Church's teaching about married life as revealed to us by God, could still be truly and sincerely willing to discern the will of God about their present concrete situation and their free moral responsibilities. Pope Francis exhorts the faithful, particularly the families sincerely willing to be integrated fully with the Christian Community, to spiritually discern God's will and find out whether in their particular 'irregular' concrete situations, they may - trusting in God's infinite merciful love - live in God's friendship and love, the divine life of grace, and consequently be fully integrated with the Shepherd's fold, the Christian community, through the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist.

Discernment: Its General Meaning and its Different Forms

First of all, the etymological import of the word 'discernment' itself gives a good lead for its right understanding. Rooted in the Latin word *cernere*, meaning 'to see' and also related to the Greek word *dia-krinein*, (*dia*: 'through', *krinein*: 'sifting'), discernment indicates a process of separating and distinguishing one thing from another, to be able to see clearly the different reasons for or against the issue being discerned.³

There are various areas where discernment is applied to reach a good decision. In fact, today we come across different forms of discernment, namely, social,

³ "Cernere" (to see) bears similar meanings connotated with "perceiving," "being acquainted with," "understanding," "judging." It is also important to emphasize the particle "dis" in the word *dis-cernere*, since it clearly points out the importance of distinguishing rightly one reason or situation from another to reach a clear vision in a complex and obscure situation. The word "discernment" is also related to a word-series, which indicates also the different shades of meaning related to the word itself, namely, *crisis*, *criterion*, *critique*, and *discretion*.

moral, managerial, spiritual, Christian and others. The major distinguishing factors, besides their possible different methods, are the subject-matter, the motivations and the values inherent in the issues to be studied or discerned. These modes of discernment, although quite different in their objectives, may also in certain particular circumstances include and consider the spiritual element in their discernment.

Taking discernment in its general meaning, namely, as a tool in our daily life for reaching good decisions, we are expected first of all to pause and study well the different situations confronting us. We then weigh and evaluate objectively the different reasons in favour of or against each alternative. This rational process demands a good grasp of the whole situation and it surely depends on one's interior freedom, intelligence, and judicious mind for the objective evaluation of the reasons for and against the matter being discerned in view of the final decision to be taken.

Spiritual Discernment

These are a few reflections on the meaning of spiritual discernment and about the main tenets regulating this discernment, when faced with questions or problems in our personal spiritual life, in the family, in one's work or profession, in our relationships, and in the social, political life. Discernment implies a process and the discerning persons are expected to be well-equipped with the way the discernment is carried out.⁴

In its strict meaning, the spiritual discernment refers to the discerning *experience of the promptings of the Holy Spirit* working within us and in our life-relationships. The spiritual factor is strictly and mainly connected with the purpose, the process, and the operation of the discernment.

Reflecting on the spiritual discernment, one is expected to keep in mind first and foremost that the faith issue is at its very centre. The spiritual discernment, grounded in faith experiences, is an expression of one's faith in a personal God who intimately loves us and cares for each one of us. Through various ways and means, God communicates himself to us, inspiring us, communicating himself to us and thus inviting us to listen to and accept his inner voice within us. As an expression of faith the spiritual discernment is a sincere searching for the word of God and of his loving will in our daily life, particularly when we are faced with personal or communitarian decisions for which we are responsible. In discernment we enter into a deep and very delicate experience, namely, the

⁴ Gilles Cusson, "Pour mieux situer le 'discernement spirituel,'" *Cahiers de Spiritualité Ignatienne* 67 (1993): 212-216.

spiritual communication between the Divine Spirit and ourselves, while the evil forces will still be exerting their subtle influences to lead us astray, take bad decisions, and thus distance us from God and from his loving goodness.

Jesus and the Will of His Father

Jesus Christ - the Son of God - has set for us a sublime example of searching and fulfilling God's will throughout his life. This was the main and principal aim in all his life, the motivation and integrating factor of his personality and of his salvific mission. Though strongly resisted and criticized by the high religious authorities and in dire conflict with the resisting stance of the Scribes and Pharisees, Christ strongly and clearly affirms that his life is all centred in fulfilling the will of God the Father:

‘And he who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him’ (Jn 8:29).

Since the Resurrection of Jesus and the Day of Pentecost, searching the will of God, discerning the direction of the Holy Spirit, had always been the driving force in the mission of the Apostles and of the disciples. In his Letter to the Romans St Paul explicitly exhorts the community to discern and read the will of God: “I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world (Gk: *to aioni*: this age), but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and the perfect will of God” (Rm 12:1-2).

In his First Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul again insists on the need of discerning the will of God: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test (Gk: *dokimazete*) everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil” (I Thess 5:16-20).

In his First Letter St John writes to the first communities: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test (Gk: *dokimazete*) the spirits, to see whether they are of God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this, you know the Spirit of God: every spirit, which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God” (I Jn 4:1-2).

Since the spiritual discernment to discover the concrete will of God for us is an experience of our faith in God, prayer has to be the concrete expression of this faith-experience. Communicating with the Lord, prayerfully searching in faith

what God wants us to do in a determined and concrete situation, is a necessary condition for spiritual discernment.

The Desert Fathers used to discern, among other issues, whether it was God's will to be ordained a priest or to accept a bishopric. Another matter for discernment concerned the rules concerning their bodily penances or about changing their locality in the desert. In their discernment about choosing a superior, one fundamental criterion was the candidate's very good experiential knowledge of the Word of God, the Scriptures. Since for them the core of their vow of obedience was their commitment to obeying and following the will of God, then, only one spiritually immersed in the Scriptures would be the best suitable monk, the best candidate to interpret for them the word of God and thus lead them to discern and obey God's will.

The Field of Discernment

What are the matters which one can discern about? We do not discern about what God has clearly revealed to us as being his divine will for us, for instance, the Ten Commandments, the fundamental values of the Gospel, the Beatitudes, God's universal salvific will and his merciful love for all of us. Nor do we discern about matters clearly forbidden by God.⁵ We discern when we are faced with possible, good situations or alternatives, which we do not know God's will about, though we know that what he wills for us will be the right one for us.⁶ The subjects or matters for our discernment may be, for instance, vocational decisions, family life, parenthood, matters concerning work or profession, radical life-style, personal or communitarian stands to be taken in family life, in groups or communities, in political life, missionary voluntary work and others. We discern about good issues to find out which one would actually be more pleasing to God;

⁵ Michael Ivens, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2004), no. 170. St Ignatius clearly states: "It is necessary that all the matters about which we wish to make an election should in themselves be either indifferent or good, so that they function constructively within our Holy Mother, the hierarchical Church, and are not bad or opposed to her." Coathalem further explains this point: "If there is a question of a naturally stable state, the choice of which has already been made, and made badly, there is only one resource. One should try to make the best of what one is not permitted to change; one should confide oneself to the mercy of God, and try to sanctify oneself in the situation rashly assumed." Hervé Coathalem, *Ignatian Insights, A Guide to the Complete Spiritual Exercises*, 2nd ed. (Taichung, Taiwan: Kuangchi Press, 1971), 186. Ignatius himself suggests this, given the particular situation and conditions of the Church's law during his times.

⁶ *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 171-172; Coathalem, *Ignatian Insights*, 31.

this is the *magis* St Ignatius explicitly and strongly recommends in the *Principle and Foundation of The Spiritual Exercises*.⁷

Criteria

- i) As a preparation for spiritual discernment, one is expected to renew one's fundamental option for God in Jesus Christ, expressed in deeply desiring to freely accept Christ as the Lord of his/her life with openness to being moved and led by His Spirit.⁸

Consequently, the first criterion for spiritual discernment is the conviction expressed, as a deep desire and a strong will, to do the will of God, whatever this would be. We cannot begin the process of discerning, if we are still hesitant or dubious about our willingness to do God's will. This first criterion, deeply related and ingrained in the *Principle and Foundation of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises*,⁹ is an explicit manifestation of our faith in God and in his love for us in Christ.

- ii) The second criterion is our openness to truth. Sincerity with ourselves and with those involved in the discernment is necessary and should accompany the whole process. This sincerity enforces our openness to truth.
- iii) It is extremely important to be thorough and clear about the issues to be discerned. Hence, all the necessary data have to be gathered, objectively and diligently studied. Without this full information about the alternatives themselves and about the persons involved, one can hardly start considering and weighing the reasons for and against the matter in question.
- iv) To be truly objective in considering, assessing and evaluating the necessary data one has to be interiorly free. The interior freedom is the most important criterion necessary for discernment. This is often hard to attain, for it implies an interior detachment from all disordered inclinations and attachments. Without a truly objective and sincere examination of our inner self, we fail

⁷ *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 23.

⁸ St Ignatius in his Introduction to the *making of an election* sums up by saying: "Finally, nothing whatever ought to move one to choose such means or deprive myself of them except one alone, the service and praise of God Our Lord and the eternal salvation of my soul." *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 169.

⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 23.

to detect whether there is a deep-seated hard-headedness or a subtle interior resistance to be truly open to listen to others. Moreover, sincerely striving to be interiorly free, one could also detect prejudices, suspicions, pique, envy, resentfulness. More importantly one has to examine oneself well to detect whether there are personal interests or comforts lurking within oneself and swaying one's decisions. Working hard to be interiorly free by striving to overcome these possible disordered attachments which blur one's judgement and derange one's reasoning is what Ignatius calls an attitude of "indifference."¹⁰

- v) This necessary interior freedom creates an attitude of openness and of readiness to listen to each other, without excluding anyone; moreover, it instils an interior conviction that the Lord may inspire us through any person taking part in the discernment. This active listening and free communication, deeply respecting each and every person, implies a spirit of faith in the workings of the Holy Spirit within the discerning persons. Moreover, it creates a human and serene atmosphere of mutual genuine trust in those discerning the will of the Lord.
- vi) The above criteria surely demand human efforts. However, being a faith-experience and at the same time an accompanying awareness of our human frailty, the whole process of spiritual discernment has to be animated by a continual life of prayer. This prayer-awareness creates an atmosphere of serenity, objectivity, and trust during the whole discerning process and, particularly so, when we are in the process of sifting, appraising, and evaluating the reasons in favour or against the issue being discerned.

The Process of Discernment

- a) A spiritual discernment may be personal or communitarian depending on whether one individual person or a group would be making the discernment. In either case, the essential meaning of spiritual discernment and its main

¹⁰ Ibid., no. 23. "Indifference" as Michael Ivens rightly remarks, "should also be thought of in a positive way, and, regarded positively, it is an affective space within which the movements of the Spirit can be sensed and things seen in relation to the signs of God's will, an affective silence making possible an unconditional listening. The indifference in the Exercises is a stance before God and what makes it possible - and also something quite other than either apathy or stoicism - is a positive desire for God and his will." Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Surrey: Gracewing and Inigo Enterprises, 1998), 31.

tenets are the same; the difference lies in the process and dynamics of the discernment.

- b) When a group is discerning, each and everyone should be and feel free to express his or her opinion. All should be encouraged to express their own views sincerely and charitably. If among the discerning group or community there happen to be persons shouldering important responsibilities, they have to be wary lest they exert any undue influence, particularly by any prevailing air of superiority. In fact, all are expected to use a modest unassuming style in expressing their views for or against the issue or point being discerned.
- c) In a communitarian discernment a facilitator, experienced in the discernment-process - not being however one of the discerning group - will help the participants share their views orderly and calmly without any unnecessary interruptions and in full freedom. During the sharing of the reasons put forward in favour or against, the participants may ask for clarifications. The reasons for and against, serenely addressed to enlighten the issue, are expected to be expressed in a spirit of a communitarian sharing or dialogue, far from tending towards any debating! It is very important to keep the meetings and the sharing group-centred to avoid or overcome the temptation to unduly over-emphasize one's own personal opinions or reasons put forward. This will promote and better ensure an atmosphere of objectivity in the dialogue, since the participants will focus more on listening more attentively and weighing judiciously the reasons or considerations put forward. This attentive listening to each other is a sure sign of accepting and respecting the others in their discerning and in expressing their views. This discerning dialogue is particularly strengthened by the participants' prayerful trust in the Lord leading them in their efforts to search and discern his divine will, while averting the promptings of the evil spirits.
- d) During a communitarian discernment, while listening attentively and dispassionately to the reasons for or against being forwarded by the participants, to help the participants evaluate more objectively their own reasons for or against, St Ignatius recommends having two distinct sessions during the communitarian dialogue: one session just for sharing the reasons in favour and the other simply for the reasons against the issue. This method would enhance detachment and objectivity in searching the truth, since each participant would be trying hard to search and find out all possible reasons both in favour and against.

- e) It is recommended to ask someone experienced in the discernment-process to help the discerning community, particularly if this were their first experience of spiritual communitarian discernment. However, it is very important that the facilitator simply accompany and help them follow the process and by no means influence the participants one way or the other. The facilitator has to keep in mind that the discerning dialogue among the participants is foreign to any contesting or competition. While in a debate there is a battle of minds carried out in a friendly spirit but ending with one side winning the day, by contrast in a discerning dialogue the process is completely different, as explained above.

As a concluding note, one may affirm that being truly free to discern God's will and to detach oneself offers a certain assurance that this communal discernment engenders a true interior peace in all, no matter what the final outcome would be. Moreover, whether the communitarian decision is taken by a consultative or a deliberative vote, it is highly important that each would be interiorly convinced that one has done one's utmost to discern the will of the Lord and each and every participant will be at peace within himself and ready to accept peacefully the decision taken at the end, which Ignatius would describe and express as "*todos contentos*."¹¹

Three Ways or Methods of Discerning

After specifying the fundamental nature of spiritual discernment, the possible issues to be discerned about and the necessary criteria, we now consider and reflect on what St Ignatius calls "Times" of discernment or three situations or ways of discerning God's will as explained in *The Spiritual Exercises*.

The "First Time" is "when God our Lord so moves and attracts the will that without doubting or being able to doubt, such a dedicated soul follows what is shown, just as St Paul and St Matthew did when they followed Christ Our Lord."¹²

St Ignatius explains that in this case the person undergoing this spiritual experience is so strongly drawn to follow the inspiration that the person is certain that the call is from God without any doubting. As one of the commentators remarks, "this is the case of an overwhelming attraction, unquestionably

¹¹ "All pleased."

¹² *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 175.

divine.”¹³ However, it does not necessarily follow that it implies an extraordinary experience, with visions. St Ignatius simply says that the person is so sure that God has manifested his will that “such a dedicated soul follows what is shown.” If we take this “First Time” as a very dramatic experience, we would naturally tend to expect it to be rather rare. However, drawing on personal experiences one comes across persons being truly certain of God’s will even without undergoing any extraordinary experience, for instance, when one perseveres peacefully in an extremely difficult situation in life or bravely takes a very difficult step with respect to his or her vocation in life, stating simply: “I am certain, without any doubt that this is what God wants me to do!” Before excluding offhand this case as a discernment of the “First Time,” one could further test the case by the “Third Time of discernment” explained further on.¹⁴

Discerning the Spirits

St Ignatius refers to this way of “discerning the spirits” as the “Second Time” which “is present when sufficient clarity and knowledge are received from the experience of consolations or desolations and of discerning the various spirits.”¹⁵

Interior spiritual peace, as the fruit of the Holy Spirit working within us, is a sure sign of a true authentic discernment. However, it is not easy to detect whether it is truly the peace instilled by the good Spirit. One may normally experience an interior contentment or satisfaction resulting from the good efforts made to assess the reasons pro and against the issues being researched and studied in view of reaching a decision. However, this experience possibly savouring of a certain interior serenity may not be the interior spiritual peace indicating the direction of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, it may be quite difficult to make out whether the good Spirit is truly instilling his peace in our heart, when various other spirits could be evoking and exerting different drives and emotions within us.

Discerning the Spirits is fundamental in one’s “spiritual life,” since the Christian, as a disciple of the Lord Jesus, is expected to be guided by the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus to his disciples in his last intimate sharing with them, as St John’s gospel testifies: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will

¹³ Coathalem, *Ignatian Insights*, 187.

¹⁴ Jules J. Toner, *Discerning God’s Will* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1991), 121.

¹⁵ *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 176.

be in you" (Jn 14:15-17). The "world" resists and consequently cannot receive the spirit of truth,¹⁶ since it harbours other movements arising from other forces or 'spirits'. St Paul writing to the Corinthians mentions among other gifts and charisms "the ability to distinguish between spirits" (1 Cor 12:10). St John too, warns his community to be vigilant: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 Jn 4:1).

The Second Vatican Council, exhorting priests to be able to discern "the signs of the times" along with the laity, maintains that, "while testing spirits to see if they be of God, priests should discover with the instinct of faith, acknowledge with joy, and foster with diligence the various humble and exalted charisms of the laity."¹⁷

What are the "spirits" that have to be discerned? First of all, we do not have a direct intuition or understanding of the reality of the "spirit," since all our knowledge fundamentally depends on our senses. However, since early Christian times the word "spirit(s)" has been largely in use, bearing different meanings and functions. St Paul in his First Letter to the Thessalonians expresses prayerfully his desire that the Community at Thessalonica live in holiness in spirit, soul, and body and heartily exhorts them: "May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit (*pneuma*) and soul (*psike*) and body (*soma*) be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it" (1 Thess 5:23-24).

Although when we speak of our spiritual life we normally understand a life lived under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we do also experience other 'spirits' at work within us, preternatural and natural,¹⁸ which may be described as forces, tendencies, movements, attractions or repulsions working within us and exerting their influences upon us. Discerning these experiences implies the careful sifting and distinguishing among these motions within us to examine and find out which directions they are or might be leading us to. While going through this exercise, we keep in mind all the time the main and fundamental purpose of our Christian living.¹⁹

¹⁶ "He said to them, 'You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world'" (Jn 8:23).

¹⁷ Vatican II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 9, in Walter Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966), 553.

¹⁸ "Preternatural" out of the ordinary course of nature.

¹⁹ "What then is discernment? It is the distinguishing between these spiritual impulses, moods, and states, so that I can decide whether they are good or bad, so that I can say what their direction

We experience various motions or tendencies evoking within us attractions or repulsions. Unless we make efforts to be fully aware of these movements and tensions working within us, we may be easily led astray by fleeting impulses or emotions carrying ambivalent or deceitful suggestions. Consequently, it is vital to discern and decide rightly when we are gripped and affected by these motions. This is not an easy task and we have to keep praying for spiritual wisdom and for a true and a sincere self-knowledge.

At this stage, we have to examine well and reflect deeply on the interior movements experienced and described as “consolation” and “desolation.” In consolation a person experiences the presence of the Spirit drawing him/her nearer to God and instilling peace and spiritual joy, fruits of an increase in hope, faith, and love. On the other hand, when one experiences desolation one feels distant from God and may go through a period of dryness, sadness, together with craving for lowly things together with a sense of disbelief.²⁰

Drawing on the spiritual experience of those who truly strive to follow the Lord, one may deduce that the workings and the influence of the Holy Spirit engender within them true happiness and spiritual joy. St Paul writing to the Galatians explicitly mentions the fruits of the Holy Spirit working within us as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23). On the contrary, the evil forces strive to rob us of this spiritual peace and consolation. In fact, even “if the basic orientation of a person is towards God, the evil spirit could even feign donning the apparel of ‘the angel of light’²¹ offering superficial pseudo-consolations to veer the person onto a false path which could eventually lead him or her away from God. Thus a ‘consolation’ which seems to be good in its initial stages is bad if it eventually leads one astray from God.”²²

St Ignatius is very clear in his description of spiritual consolation: “By spiritual consolation I mean that which occurs when some interior motion is caused within the soul through which it comes to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord. Finally, under the word consolation I include every increase in hope,

is. This direction, particularly in a prayerful context, such as making the Spiritual Exercises, will be for a generous Christian towards the more perfect, the more Christ-like.” Michael Kyne, “Discernment of Spirits and Christian Growth,” *The Way Supplement* 6 (1968): 22.

²⁰ John C. Futrell, “Rules for Discernment of Spirits I,” in Marian Cowan, John C. Futrell, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola: A Handbook for Directors* (New York: Le Jacq Publishing, 1982), 139-152.

²¹ “And no wonder! For even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Cor 11:14).

²² Cowan, Futrell, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, 153-161.

faith, and charity, and every interior joy which calls and attracts one towards heavenly things and to the salvation of one's soul, by bringing it tranquility and peace in its Creator and Lord."²³ On the other hand, with respect to spiritual desolation, Ignatius writes: "By this kind of desolation I mean everything contrary to what is described concerning consolation, that is, obtuseness of soul, turmoil within it, an impulsive motion towards low and earthly things, or disquiet from various agitations and temptations. These move one towards lack of faith and leave one without hope and without love. One is completely listless, tepid, and unhappy and feels separated from our Creator and Lord. For, just as consolation is contrary to desolation, in the same way the thoughts which arise from consolation are likewise, contrary to those which spring from desolation."²⁴

St Ignatius, offering us very wise advice, suggests that when we are in desolation we are not to make any decision, unless the desolation results from our own resisting to God's grace. However, we have to withstand the desolation with prayer and penance. While experiencing the deep influences of good and evil, we have to keep in mind that the spiritual discernment of God's will is not to be simply reduced to the application of rules and methods. Discerning these strong tendencies, we have to keep in mind the importance of examining whether and how they could be unduly influencing our inner freedom. Deepening our personal contact with the Lord in prayer, we will surely be greatly helped to detect whether these strong tendencies would be intruding on or stifling this freedom.

Coathalem, in his solid study of the *Spiritual Exercises*, summing up his reflections on the vital role of the "Second Time" in discernment, points out that this is "the time when we experience consolations or desolations which manifest the trend of God's call and serve as guideposts for the 'election.' These experiences do not convey complete certitude of their own, but must be interpreted in the light of the rules for the discernment of spirits. Such light will show whether they bear the mark of the good or evil spirit, and whether they should be followed up with action, or be resisted and rejected. This 'Second Time' does not give us tranquil assurance, excluding all doubt, as the 'First Time' does. In a subject who is not prudent, illusions may arise from these experiences. If however, we have experience in the ways of the spiritual life and, if we are open and helped by a director, these graces can be very enlightening. St Ignatius personally had frequent recourse to this method, more often than to others, as his *Spiritual Journal* shows."²⁵

²³ *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 316.

²⁴ *Ibid*, no. 317.

²⁵ Coathalem, *Ignatian Insights*, 188. In an important letter to Fr Francis Borgia, Ignatius gives

The experience of consolation and desolation during discernment, though enlightening the trend of God's call, does not necessarily convey complete certitude on its own. It is the deep spiritual personal experience which one prayerfully goes through that ultimately indicates if and where the Spirit of God is leading the discerning person.

The Third Time: Reasoning - Judging - Deciding

We now present what Ignatius calls the "Third Time," a quite common and, I would say, normal way of discerning, summarily described as the reasoning method of discernment. It is sometimes suggested or recommended as a further 'check-up' given that the "Second Time," being an "intimately spiritual" one, may demand the reassuring reasoning way of discernment.

us quite an insight of his discerning God's will according to the "Second Time." Charles V had asked the cardinal's hat for Borgia and the Pope was quite willing to bestow it. St Ignatius wrote to Borgia about this important matter: "With regard to the cardinal's hat, I thought that I should give you some account of my own experience, to God's greater glory, and speak as I would to my own soul. It was as though I had been informed that the emperor had as a matter of fact nominated you and that the pope was willing to create you a cardinal. At once I felt impelled to do all I can to prevent it. And yet, not being certain of God's will, as I saw many reasons for both sides, I gave orders in the community that all the priests should say Mass and those not priests offer their prayers for three days for divine guidance, to God's greater glory. During this space of three days I reflected and talked with others about it, and experienced certain fears, or at least not that liberty of spirit to speak against and prevent the project, saying to myself, "How do I know what God our Lord wishes to effect?" Consequently, I did not feel entirely safe in speaking against it. At other times, in my customary prayers, I felt that these fears had taken themselves off. I repeated this prayer at intervals, now with the fears now without them, until finally, on the third day, I made my usual prayer with a determination so final, so peaceful and free, to do all I could with the pope and the cardinals to prevent it. I felt sure at the time, and still feel so, that, if I did not act thus, I should not be able to give a good account of myself to God our Lord - indeed, that I should give quite a bad one. Therefore, I have felt, and now feel, that it is God's will that I oppose this move. Even though others might think otherwise, and bestow this dignity on you, I do not see that there would be any contradiction, since the same Divine Spirit could move me to this action for certain reasons and others to the contrary for other reasons, and thus bring about the result desired by the emperor. May God our Lord always do what will be to his greater praise and glory. I believe it would be quite in order for you to answer the letter on this subject which Master Polanco is writing in my name, and declare the intention and purpose with which God our Lord has inspired you and may now inspire you. Your opinion would thus appear in writing and could then be produced whenever it may be called for, leaving the whole matter in the hands of God our Lord, so that his holy will may be done in all our affair." William J. Young, ed., *Letters of St Ignatius of Loyola* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1959), *Letter* 265, 259.

Ignatius writes: "The 'Third Time' is one of tranquillity."²⁶ First of all, Ignatius reminds the discerning person to keep first and foremost in mind the fundamental purpose of his or her life as a human being, namely, to praise God our Lord and to save one's soul. Hence, the discerning persons will keep this fundamental motivation as a guiding light. Being a discernment of tranquillity it is expected to be a time when we are not in depression, oppressed or moved by various spirits. It has to be a time when with the free and tranquil use of our natural powers - our reasoning and judging faculties and our free will - we can think calmly, reason out, judge, and freely reach the right decision about a specific matter.

The first stage in this discernment is to distinguish clearly between the different situations confronting us and which may be two or more alternatives. After collecting all the necessary data related to the matter to be discerned, the second stage will be to analyse, reflect upon and intelligently evaluate separately the possible alternatives in view of reaching and forming a judgement.²⁷ This is a naturally human process of judging a situation which everyone can go through, depending on one's intellectual ability and judicious perception. However, although discernment is not possible without reasoning and judging, it does not follow that an intelligent and judicious person is *ipso facto* well-equipped and ready for spiritual discernment. We have to keep bearing in mind that spiritual discernment is a faith-prayerful experience. In fact St Ignatius insists that going through this kind of discernment "I should beg God our Lord to be pleased to move my will and to put into my mind what I ought to do in regard to the matter proposed, so that it will be more to his praise and glory. I should beg to accomplish this by reasoning well and faithfully with my intellect and by choosing in conformity with his most holy will and good pleasure."²⁸ It follows that the necessary prayerful attitude enlightens and directs the discerning person to consider and think over rationally the advantages or benefits one would gain by accepting the proposed matter to be decided upon and, on the other hand, to consider the disadvantages and dangers if one would refuse it. This would be the procedure with each alternative, looking into its benefits and its disadvantages.

The next step will be to weigh well the reasons for and against each alternative. Having examined and thoroughly reflected on the different reasons, one will then detect to which side "right reason" mostly inclines. Relying on the stronger and more reasonable movement and not on any sensual inclination one would then make up one's mind, that is, to judge and decide.

²⁶ *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 177.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 180.

Since this is not merely a prudential assessment, Ignatius, keeping always in mind the end for which we were created, namely, “to praise God our Lord and save the soul,” writes: “Furthermore, I ought to find myself indifferent, that is, without any disordered affection, to such an extent that I am not more inclined or emotionally disposed towards taking the matter proposed rather than relinquishing it, nor more towards relinquishing it rather than taking it. Instead I should find myself in the middle, like the pointer of a balance, in order to be ready to follow that which I shall perceive to be more to the glory and praise of God our Lord and the salvation of my soul.”²⁹

Lastly, to guide someone during discernment one is expected to be familiar with the discernment-process, namely, to have made a “discernment grounded in experience, empathy and wisdom.”³⁰

Conclusion: Prayer for Confirmation

Once such a deliberation has been made, the person who has reached the decision-point should then turn with great diligence to prayerfully place himself or herself before God our Lord and offer him this “election,” so that his Divine Majesty may be pleased to accept and confirm it if it is to his greater service and praise.³¹ This prayer for confirmation, which St Ignatius recommends at the end of a process of spiritual discernment, is another sign of trust in the accompanying divine light during the whole discernment process itself. Ignatius concludes: “When the decision has been made, the person who has made it ought with great diligence go to prayer before God our Lord and offer him that decision, that the Divine Majesty may be pleased to receive it and confirm it, if it is conducive to his greater service and praise,” leaving this further grace in the hands of the loving God.³²

²⁹ Ibid., no. 179.

³⁰ Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, 137.

³¹ *Spiritual Exercises*, no. 179-183.

³² Ibid., no. 183.