

DISCERNING THE WILL OF GOD

Spiritual Exercises, 1: “By the term ‘Spiritual Exercises’ is meant every method of examination of conscience, of meditation, of contemplation, of vocal and mental prayer, and of other spiritual activities that will be mentioned later. For just as taking a walk, journeying on foot, and running are bodily exercises, so we call Spiritual Exercises every way of *preparing* and *disposing* the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and, after their removal, of *seeking and finding* the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul.”

KINDS OF CHOICE

FOUNDATION

DISPOSITION

MEANS

DISCERNMENT (3 MODES)

FRUIT

KINDS OF CHOICE

Kenneth is struggling financially. He knows that if he does not inform his employer of a recent transaction with a customer, he will be able to retain a greater share of the profits from this transaction.

Ruth is married and has three small children; life is busy for her and her husband. Ruth sings well, and the choir director asks if she would lead the singing for the Holy Week services in the parish. Ruth loves such singing and service. She also knows that this commitment will involve many hours of practicing with the choir, in addition to the ceremonies themselves.

Anthony is under pressure to complete a business project in the next few days. He had planned to spend an hour with his eight-year-old son this evening, but now wonders whether he may need to dedicate this time to the business project.

Lisa is aware of a small but real tension with her friend, Betty. She wonders whether she should call Betty today to say hello, in the hopes of resolving the tension.

Walter says hello to his friend, Jerry, after Mass on Sunday. The thought occurs to him to invite Jerry to a talk on prayer, on Wednesday evening, in the parish. He wonders whether he should mention this to Jerry.

Fr. Rainero Cantalamessa: *when I must decide* “to make or not make a journey, to do a job, to make a visit, to buy something.... I’ll first ask [God] by the simple means of prayer that is at everyone’s disposal, if it is his will that I make that journey, do that job, make that visit, buy that object, and then I’ll act or not.... I have submitted the question to God. I have emptied myself of

my own will. I have renounced deciding for myself and I have given God the chance to intervene in my life if he so wishes.... Just as a faithful servant never takes an order from an outsider without saying, 'I must first ask my master,' so the true servant of God undertakes nothing without saying to himself, 'I must first pray a little to know what my Lord wants of me!' The will of God thus penetrates one's existence more and more, making it more precious and rendering it a 'living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God' (Rm 12:1)." *Obedience: The Authority of the Word*, 56-57.

In small daily choices:

1. Pray
2. Review the factors
3. Make our best decision
4. Do it with peace
5. Review and learn

Robert: When I went to college, I started going to daily Mass. That was where the idea of a vocation started to be stirred. I went to daily Mass all year. I was also making visits to the Blessed Sacrament. That was where I first felt deep, deep stirrings in my heart; I really started feeling the pull. I would spend an hour before the Blessed Sacrament in the evening, absorbed in peace and serenity. I said to myself, "Whatever this is, I want it. If it means being a priest, I'll do it."

In my sophomore year in college, I started dating Helen. I really learned from her what it means to love. I was in love with her and she with me. She blew my horizons into eternity. I could see endless possibilities in life with Helen. All that stuff about being in love and self-sacrifice – I would have given my life for her. Sometimes she would be in the chapel too when I was praying in the evening, and I would say, "Lord, the love I have for you and for Helen are the same thing."

At the same time, when I was dating Helen, the idea of priesthood became solid for me, real and consistent. Several persons asked me if I'd ever thought of being a priest.

One day I had lunch with the priest who was the chaplain. I really liked him. He was real, and he seemed happy. He told me that he thought I would make a good priest and that I should consider the priesthood. For the first time this became real, and I started to get scared. So I told Helen that we needed just to be friends. It was very hard. She knew I was thinking of the priesthood.

I finished my degree and started teaching. Once I was talking with a friend who told me that I needed to do something, that I'd been on this marriage-priesthood seesaw for two or three years. I said to myself, "Yes, he's right. It's time for me to face this question."

Brian: We had been married for several years and our third child had just been born. I had worked in finance for a number of years, but found myself increasingly interested in serving in a more direct way. The thought of becoming an optometrist continued to arise in my mind, all the more as my life of faith deepened. I spoke with Lisa about this. We both thought that I could do

it, but it would mean some real sacrifices for Lisa while I completed optometry school. For several months we talked and prayed about this.

THE FOUNDATION: WHY DO I WANT TO DO GOD’S WILL?

St. Ignatius, Spiritual Exercises, “Principle and Foundation” (contemporary reading): God created us out of love so that we might praise and reverence his infinite love and goodness, and by dedicating our lives to his service, might enter an eternity of joyful communion with him.

God created all the other things on the earth for us, to help us attain this purpose for which he created us.

As a result, we should appreciate and use these gifts of God—places, occupations, relationships, material possessions, and all the other blessings of God’s creation—insofar as they help toward the purpose for which we are created, and we should let them go insofar as they hinder our attainment of this purpose.

Consequently, in choices in which we are free to choose among various options, we must hold ourselves as in a balance with regard to these gifts of God’s creation. This means that for our part we do not set our desires on health rather than sickness, wealth rather than poverty, being held in honor rather than in little esteem, a long life rather than a short life, and likewise in all the rest.

Our only desire and choice is for what better leads us to the purpose for which God created us: to praise and serve him in this life, and so enter the joy of eternal life.

Michael: I can actually point to a moment when the pieces of my fragmented life came together for the first time. I was a sophomore in college, going in several directions at once, trying to keep my options open, plagued, in particular, with questions about God. On the day of my nineteenth birthday I went into the woods on the outskirts of town and grandly announced to God, “I’m staying here in the woods until you do it.”

What was “it”? To let me know for sure that He existed. To reveal how I could know Him. To speak to me.

I stayed in the woods all day and into the evening. I was hungry and thirsty and it was getting cold. I was a little scared, but I was stubborn. I was determined to stay in the woods until I got an answer.

The answer came at around 8:30 in the evening. The puzzle of God suddenly cleared up in my mind. A conviction grew in me that He did indeed exist and that the Church was indeed an institution that told the truth about Him. I could have confidence in it. The Lord spoke to my heart too. He loved me. He would forgive my sins and heal my wounds. I was home. All this

was a free gift of God. I was a desperate case, so he had pity on me and gave me everything at once.

This was the foundation. The vocation I discerned later flowed from this relationship with the Lord that began that evening in the woods. That was the key. The relationship has been there ever since.

Catherine had finished college and had begun working. She was dating a young man and was also considering religious life. Months passed, and her search for God's will continued. One day she was driving home from work. Catherine describes what occurred that evening:

The presence of Jesus palpably filled that white '93 Ford Escort *LX*. I hesitate to describe the experience for fear of making it sound more or less than it was. It was like being in a room with someone you love but cannot see; yet, you can feel his eyes on you. He didn't say anything. He just looked at me.... And His look: it was like when a guy looks at you, not with lust, but with a desire that you be his girl.... It's astounding to have God look at you like that, both exhilarating and humbling because you know it's totally unmerited. To my surprise, I felt very much like when I had first fallen in love, except it was magnified a hundred times.

A very direct dialogue ensued.

I kept saying, "What do you want? What do you want?"

The gist of his reply was, "You can do whatever you please. You can get married; you can have the job of your choice; but it would please me if you have me."

I melted.

He had asked a question and waited for an answer. He wouldn't force me. It was powerful, but gentle persuasion. Never have I felt so free yet, at the same time, it seemed impossible that I should say no. I pulled into the parking lot and sat in my car, finally saying, "Whatever. Whatever you want, Lord." Then the presence that had surrounded me seemed to pierce through me and close around my heart.

St. John Henry Newman: "We are all created to his glory—we are created to do his will. I am created to do something or to be something for which no one else is created; I have a place in God's counsels, in God's world, which no one else has... God knows me and calls me by my name. God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission."

Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you" (Jer. 1:5).

Isaiah: "The Lord called me from birth, from my mother's womb he gave me my name" (Is 49:1).

St. Paul, God, "who from my mother's womb had set me apart and called me through his grace" (Gal. 1:15).

Jesus: “Behold, I come to do your will, O God” (Heb. 10:7); He has come “to do the will of him who sent me” (Jn 6:38) and always does “what is pleasing to him” (Jn 8:29).

THE DISPOSITION: OPENNESS TO WHATEVER GOD WILLS

Catherine: “Whatever you want, Lord.” “Never have I felt so free.”

THE MEANS

Holy Eucharist

Martha: “Last spring I made an eight-day Ignatian retreat. Since then I began to make a holy hour every day before the Blessed Sacrament. While I was discerning, I brought this decision daily to the Lord in that hour.”

Theresa: “In my visits to the Blessed Sacrament each night in the lovely college chapel, I begged and begged; but I noticed my earnest pleadings being transformed into, ‘Not my will but Thine be done.’”

Sacred Scripture

Richard: I took the place of Zacchaeus. I was there in the tree, waiting for Jesus to pass by. When I imagine the Gospel, I don’t see things in great detail. I just had a sense of being in the tree, waiting for Jesus to come. Then he did come, and he stopped. I sensed that, for him, at that moment, I was all that mattered. He was giving me his entire attention. And that was where the prayer stopped – Jesus looking at me, with his whole attention, with warmth, with desire to be with me, and my looking at him in response. It was quiet and happy. It lightened my worry and self-doubt. I knew that Jesus wanted to be with Zacchaeus regardless of Zacchaeus’s sinfulness and that by being with him, simply by letting him know that he was loved, Zacchaeus would be transformed. I felt that Jesus was with me in the same way. Then I heard Jesus say, “Richard, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house.” And we were together in the house, without many words, just together.

Silence

Spiritual Direction

Review of Spiritual Experience

Edward: When I make the review, my attentiveness during the prayer is better. I started writing it to help me do it more faithfully. It makes the graces explicit. It's a confirmation of what happened in the prayer. I find that writing the review reinforces the habit of praying attentively.

Denise: The key for me is writing things down. Then I can look back at what has happened in my prayer. It's about not forgetting. Then I can talk about it later in spiritual direction.

DISCERNMENT: THE THREE MODES

The First Mode: Clarity beyond Doubting

St. Ignatius, *Autobiography*: While he was persevering in his abstinence from eating meat, and was so firm in this that he had no thought of changing, one day in the morning, when he had risen, some meat prepared for eating was represented to him, as though he saw it with his bodily eyes, without his having any desire for it beforehand. At the same time there came to him a great assent of the will that from then on he should eat it. And although he remembered his former intention, he could not doubt about the matter, but resolved that he ought to eat meat. Relating this afterward to his confessor, the confessor told him that he should consider whether this might not be a temptation. But he, examining it well, could never doubt about this.

Three elements:

- something is shown to a person (“the devout soul follows *what is shown* to it”),
- the person’s will is drawn to what is shown (“God Our Lord *so moves and attracts the will*”),
- and the person cannot doubt that what is shown, and what so draws the will, is truly God’s will (“*without doubting or being able to doubt*”).

Anne: A religious experience occurred in November of Anne’s senior year of high school. Religious life as a lifestyle had never been a consideration for her. She remembers asking out of curiosity what kind of girl could become a nun. After naming some qualifications, sister turned to Anne and said, “Someone like you. You could become a sister.” Anne’s response was a definite and silent, “No way!” Anne also recalls praying intensely to God and expressing her desire to do whatever he wanted her to do EXCEPT become a nun. These were the only times the subject ever came up and they were soon forgotten.

It happened on a Sunday morning, the last day of a weekend retreat made by the seniors. Anne had stopped to make a visit in the chapel. As she began to kneel down she experienced a powerful shock – like a lightning bolt that went straight through her from head to feet. She felt her whole being lifted up in a surging “yes!” She had no control over it. It was much like riding the crest of a wave – one must go with it. There were no images, no words, no arguments, no doubts, no reasoning process to make. It was decided – period! She knelt there a few seconds

absorbing the impact. There was a sense of great peace and joy and direction. In fact, it was the only time she had ever experienced such certitude.

Along with the call to religious life was also the name of the religious community. All that was needed was for Anne to follow through on the decision.

The decision was tested many times. In the course of the year the certitude never changed, neither did the deep inner peace and joy....

It was this certitude and deep peace that carried her through the year, enabled her to leave home, and helped her weather the homesickness and discouragement of the novitiate. For years after, Anne would feel the powerful impact of the experience whenever she recalled it. It was a gift, and she confesses that she would never have made it [through those years] without it. It gave her a basic joyous outlook and confidence in life and the secure sense of being loved by God – a love that she could feel in a tangible way. In her late thirties, Anne went through a period of spiritual desolation. Part of the desolation, the most painful part, was the loss of that sense of God’s loving presence. And yet, in the midst of the confusion, guilt, and emptiness, the certitude of her vocation was left unshaken. It could not be doubted – when she had to believe that God was there, she knew he had chosen her to be his as a religious.

As she reflects on this, she believes that certitude comes from the fact that essentially the decision was God’s; she only freely consented to accept it, to ride along on the crest of it.

Joel: Today is the anniversary of my entering the Society [of Jesus] – it is 51 years. I remember the day I was called – I shall never forget it. And I remember how I was moved by Fr. Jim Harmon to pray, offering myself to the Father through Mary and her Son. I cannot doubt about the effectiveness of that prayer. The memory of that call has kept me in the Society until now. I cannot go back, and I do not want to go back. But the Lord took me such as I was, and slowly molded me.”

Margaret: Finally, at the close of the semester, the answer came suddenly and stopped all questioning. “For you, the...cloistered life is the way to give Me everything. Others can do this in other ways, but this is to be your way.” These may not have been the exact words, but the message was unmistakable. There was never another question or doubt before or after the Sisters accepted me into the...community.

Gary: I would find it hard to say exactly when my calling as a priest first became clear to me. It was always there, in a sense. It was there as far back as I can remember thinking about my future, certainly already when I was in grade school. Faith was an important part of our family life, and we were always active in the parish. Catholic school also helped. So, the spiritual soil for a vocation was there, though I was the only boy in the family that felt this call.

There was never any struggle about my vocation, never any searching to see whether God wanted me to be a priest. It was just clear to me and has always been clear to me since. I always had great esteem for marriage, and my parents were great examples, but I knew that it wasn’t my call. I just longed to be a priest and live that life. It was all I wanted.

In my last year in college, when I had to decide what I would do, there was, in a sense, no decision to make: I knew that God wanted me to be a priest. I remember that in my last year in

the seminary before I became a deacon, a retreat director said that I needed to think well about it since this was the definitive commitment. I was willing to reflect but I knew, in my heart, that it was already clear. It had always been clear. It still is today, after so many years of priesthood. I've never doubted this call and I can't doubt it. I've always been grateful to God for that.

First Mode of Discernment: Questions to Consider

What specifically was shown to the person? Was it, as with Anne, both a calling to religious life and to a precise religious community? Or, as with Gary, simply the calling to priesthood without further specification? In the experience, what specifically did God show the one discerning?

In the experience, was there a clear attraction and drawing of the will toward what was shown? Was there, as with Ignatius, "a great assent of the will"? As with Anne, "a surging 'yes!'"? As with Gary, a single-hearted drawing – "It was all I wanted"?

Was it truly impossible for the person to doubt that this discernment was of God? Like Ignatius, who "could never doubt" his discernment about a penitential practice? Like Anne, whose discernment "could not be doubted" through all the vicissitudes of life?

Has the one discerning spoken with a spiritual guide about the experience?

Has the recipient of this gift acted upon it?

The Second Mode: An Attraction of the Heart

Discernment of spirits:

Spiritual Consolation

William Kernan, *My Road to Certainty*: "I looked out of the train window to the California countryside which I was rapidly leaving behind me – the orange groves shimmering in the light of the late afternoon sun the little bungalows which appeared here and there for a moment and then were gone as the train sped on, and the mountains far out on the horizon.... An upsurge of gratitude swept through me and warmed my heart, and I thanked God for His Providence and goodness which had kept me all the days of my life and which, I was sure, would keep me safe forever. I could go on thinking of tomorrow in terms of today. Something would always be the same in every tomorrow; something would be certain – God."

George: "This morning in the Chapel, prayer was difficult. In spite of so many and fervent appeals to Christ's love there was no feeling in me of response from the Beloved. I then turned to Our Blessed Lady and said something like this – "Please ask your Son to grant me the grace to

love Him more and more.... This was said only a very few minutes before the end of the half hour which had been arid. Suddenly I felt a very sweet touch which warmed my whole being and stirred me to feelings of deep and moving gratitude to the Beloved and to his Mother.”

Third Rule. The third is of spiritual consolation. I call it consolation when some interior movement is caused in the soul, through which the soul comes to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord, and, consequently when it can love no created thing on the face of the earth in itself, but only in the Creator of them all. Likewise when it sheds tears that move to love of its Lord, whether out of sorrow for one’s sins, or for the passion of Christ our Lord, or because of other things directly ordered to his service and praise. Finally, I call consolation every increase of hope, faith and charity, and all interior joy that calls and attracts to heavenly things and to the salvation of one’s soul, quieting it and giving it peace in its Creator and Lord. (316)

Spiritual Desolation

Alice is a dedicated woman of faith, active for years in her parish. Sharing the life of the parish is a source of spiritual strength for her and brings her joy in the Lord. More recently she has moved to a new town and joined the local parish. Here too Alice has sought involvement in the parish community but in her new setting has found this more difficult. A year passes amid struggles and she begins to question the value of her efforts.

“Alice sees herself as a pretty complete failure and feels altogether discouraged.... Recently, even in her own personal prayer, she has experienced feelings of emptiness, of being abandoned by God. She feels that God is no longer near and she becomes overwhelmed with frustration. She wonders if she isn’t altogether losing her faith in God’s loving care. She does continue to be faithful to community worship and to her personal times for prayer, but it all seems hopeless and meaningless.”

Walter ended the preceding day discouraged by difficulties at work and tired from the long hours he has been working. He found it hard to pray before retiring, and did not feel God’s presence as he prayed. Walter prays for a half-hour each morning before work. This morning as he rises, his heart is still discouraged and burdened. He begins his prayer as usual, but with the sense that his efforts will be in vain. The first few minutes are dry and distracted, and a feeling grows in him that the whole time of prayer will be fruitless. Walter finds himself considering simply ending the prayer....

Fourth Rule. The fourth is of spiritual desolation. I call desolation all the contrary of the third rule, such as darkness of soul, disturbance in it, movement to low and earthly things, disquiet from various agitations and temptations, moving to lack of confidence, without hope, without love, finding oneself totally slothful, tepid, sad and, as if separated from one’s Creator and Lord.

For just as consolation is contrary to desolation, in the same way the thoughts that come from consolation are contrary to the thoughts that come from desolation. (317)

Discernment of spirits: Rules for becoming aware and understanding to some extent the different movements which are caused in the soul, the good, to accept them, and the bad to reject them. (313)

St. Ignatius, *Spiritual Diary* (February 2-7, 1544): 1. Saturday – Deep devotion at Mass, with tears and increased confidence in Our Lady, and more inclination to complete poverty then and throughout the day.

2. Sunday – The same, and more inclination to no revenue then, and throughout the day.

3. Monday – The same, and with other feelings, and more inclined to no revenue throughout the day....

4. Tuesday – An abundance of devotion before Mass, during it and after it, tears.... I...felt more inclined to perfect poverty at the time and throughout the day....

5. Wednesday – Devotion before Mass and during it, not without tears, more inclined to perfect poverty....

6. Thursday – Before Mass with deep devotion and tears, and a notable warmth and devotion all through the day, being always moved more to perfect poverty....

(March 12) When the mass was finished and I was in my room afterward, I found myself utterly deserted and without any help, unable to feel the presence of my mediators or of the Divine Persons but feeling so remote and so separated from them as if I had never felt their presence and never would again.

Thoughts came to me at times against Jesus, at times against another Person, finding myself confused with various thoughts such as to leave the house and rent a room in order to get away from the noise, or to fast, or to begin the masses all over again, or to move the altar to a higher floor in the house. I could find rest in nothing, desiring to end in a time of consolation and with my heart totally satisfied.

St. Ignatius, *Autograph Directory*: Among the three modes of making a choice, if God does not move a person in the first mode, one should dwell persistently on the second, that of recognizing his vocation by the experience of consolations and desolations; in such manner that, as he continues with his meditations on Christ our Lord, he observes, when he finds himself in consolation, to which part God moves him, and likewise when he finds himself in desolation. And what consolation is should be well explained; that is, spiritual joy, love, hope in things of above, tears, and every interior movement which leaves the soul consoled in our Lord. The contrary of this is desolation: sadness, lack of confidence, lack of love, dryness, etc. (no. 18)

St. Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises*: “as in consolation the good spirit guides and counsels us more, so in desolation the bad spirit” (*SpirEx*, 318)

Richard was discerning between marriage and Jesuit religious life. In January of that year, he decided that God was calling him to marriage; yet he was unable to find peace. He recounts the experience that resolved his struggle: The presence of sensible consolation when I reflected on joining the Jesuits was absolutely crucial for giving me the strength to make this decision. In retrospect it seems as though the Lord “tricked” me through this means to get past my own selfishness. Beginning in January of my senior year I began experiencing consolation during prayer in a way I never experienced before in my life. Indeed, this was the beginning of my awakening to the Holy Spirit. I recall going up to church, sitting in front of the Sacred Heart altar and being absolutely overwhelmed. This was the first time I had ever experienced this type of enjoyment from being with God. And this consolation was present whenever I reflected seriously on the possibility of entering the Jesuits. If I began to lose this desire, I would simply return to my parish church, sit in front of the Sacred Heart altar, and again that consolation would be given me. Throughout this period, I knew instinctively that this was the right decision for me because of this consolation. I had not the slightest knowledge of a technical process for finding God’s will by reflecting on my inner experience nor did I have the help of a counselor. I simply had a confirmation of sensible consolation....

Richard applied to the Jesuits in March and, five months later, in August, entered the community. Of those five intervening months, he says: I recall that I experienced many doubts in my own decision to enter the Jesuits between the period of March to August. But whenever I went to the church and sat in silence, my experience of peace was restored and with it the conviction that God was calling me.

Jessica: My life is like a symphony (I’m an organist). The opening theme was when I was in high school, sixteen or seventeen years old. There was an elusive kind of feeling, like a magnet drawing me. I loved being in church, the liturgy, the music. It all drew me.

Before high school I had thought of religious life, but not a lot. I just used to admire the sisters. But I didn’t put too much thought into it. I dated. I had a couple of boyfriends, and I enjoyed life.

One day during religion class, when I was a senior in high school, I looked out the window. I could see the Cross on the top of the steeple of the parish church. I was drawn to that like a magnet drawing me.

I went to daily Mass. There was something about Mass that drew me. I used to love to listen to the Scriptures. “Being drawn like a magnet” was a happy experience. There was a stillness about it. I used to like to look at the Cross, listen to the music in church, all of this.

During our conversation, I asked Jessica if she could describe the happiness she felt in “being drawn like a magnet.” She answered: I entered into it. It was so elusive. I would watch the censor, the incense, the stain-glass windows. I was just so involved in it. And I felt alone with it – I couldn’t share it. I didn’t think anyone would understand this. It was just being in this kind of atmosphere, being still, and enjoying it.

At times I would be at a dance and it would be fun, but I always felt that there was something more for me. And the “more” was God. As a junior in high school, I was seriously thinking

about religious life. By the time I was a senior, I knew. There wasn't one moment. It was a process, over time.

I'd be at a dance or at a symphony or other social events, and I'd know there was more for me. I'd be happy with people, with friends. I'd be joyful, having a good time, but I'd feel like there was more for me, more that was drawing me. The "more" was God calling me to be his bride. When I told my parents, they cried, and I said, I have to go. There was such a drawing, like a magnet draws. This is God's story with me – a love affair.

Second Mode of Discernment: Questions to Consider

Do I have the *disposition* Ignatius describes – “Whatever you want, Lord”?

Am I using the *spiritual means* to grow in that disposition?

Do I seek the *spaces of quiet* which assist discernment?

Am I *attentive* to my spiritual experience?

Am I learning about discernment of spirits: to be aware of, understand, and take action in response to spiritual consolation and spiritual desolation?

Are the inclinations and disinclinations of my heart truly inspired by God – truly *spiritual*?

Do I have *sufficient* clarity?

Am I *speaking* of my discernment with a person of spiritual wisdom?

The Third Mode: A Preponderance of Reasons

St. Ignatius, *Spiritual Diary*:

He identifies various *advantages* to a *mitigated poverty*: the Society of Jesus will be better maintained; its members will not trouble others by begging; they will be less exposed to disordered concern for their material welfare; the time necessary for begging will be free for ministry; their churches will be better maintained and so foster greater devotion, and so forth.

But St. Ignatius also perceives *disadvantages* to a *mitigated poverty*: the members will be less diligent in helping others, less ready to go on journeys and endure hardships, and less able to draw others to true poverty.

When St. Ignatius considers the *advantages* of *radical poverty*, the list grows long: the members will have greater spiritual strength through closer imitation of Jesus who lived in such poverty; they will overcome worldly avarice more easily; they will be more united through sharing the same complete poverty; they will more readily hope for everything from God; they will live more humbly and more united with their humble Lord; they will be more free of desire for worldly consolation; they will give greater witness as others see that they do not desire worldly things, and so forth. The list extends to seventeen reasons.

St. Ignatius considers that the *disadvantages* of *radical poverty* coincide with the advantages of mitigated poverty already outlined and does not repeat them. (**Disadvantages of radical poverty:** the Society will be more poorly maintained, the members will have to trouble others by begging, they will be more exposed to disordered concern for their material welfare, the time necessary for begging will not be free for ministry, their churches will be more poorly maintained and so inspire less devotion, etc.)

Pedro de Ribadeneyra, S.J., *Life of St. Ignatius:* When he wrote the Constitutions and when he decided something of great weight and importance, as we said, he always first consulted with the Lord about it in prayer; and the way he did this was the following. First he emptied himself of any passion or attachment which often confuse and obscure judgment so that it cannot discover as easily the radiance and light of the truth, and he placed himself, without any fixed inclination or predetermined direction, like matter ready to take any shape, in the hands of God our Lord. After this, with great energy he asked of God grace to know and to embrace the better choice. Then he considered with great attentiveness and weighed the reasons which presented themselves for one option and for the other, and the strength of each, and he compared them among themselves. Finally, he turned again to our Lord with what he had thought and what he had found, and reverently placed it all before his divine gaze, beseeching him that he would give him light to choose what would be most pleasing to him.

Third Mode of Discernment: First Way

Patrick: When I was downsized by my company, I began my own business. Around the same time, I had begun to get involved as a volunteer in prison ministry, and this ministry was very rewarding. After a time, the person who ran prison ministry for the diocese had to move, and I was offered the position. It was a full-time position. I said no. I didn't want a full-time job with prison ministry. I just wanted to stay as volunteer.

A few days passed and I was unsettled, not sure about this, still fighting the new position. I sought a spiritual director and told him that I've prayed but I've never discerned.

He suggested that I spend an hour a day in prayer, and gave me Scriptures for the prayer. So, each day I went to the adoration chapel in the parish and prayed with a Scripture. But I didn't get any clarity yet.

Then he suggested looking at the advantages and disadvantages of taking the position and of not taking it. I did that. First, I looked at the advantages of taking the position. There were a number of them. I knew the ministry well from my experience. I had the administrative skills from my career. I had a good background in theology, and that would help in directing the ministry in the diocese. I also knew that, if I took the position, I would be giving more of myself to the Lord. The disadvantages were that I would lose time for myself, time for the gym, for my grandkids, really, time to be lazy and not have to push myself. When I thought about not taking the position, all of this reversed.

I went through this exercise, but also continued with the Blessed Sacrament and Scripture. The whole process took about three weeks. That didn't matter to me; I wanted to do it well. About a

week and a half into it, I found that all the selfish motives for not taking the position were gone. And it seemed like the reasons for taking the position were more solid.

Then the director gave me the passage about Bartimaeus [Mk 10:46-52]. It was a passage I knew well, and I was sitting there reading it. When Jesus asked Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?” he answered, “I want to see.” That’s what I wanted, too. Then the last five words of the passage really hit me: Bartimaeus “followed him on the way.” I felt something of what Bartimaeus must have felt because I too had started to lose sight in one eye a few years before, and the eye healed. It seemed to me that the Lord was asking me to follow him, too, through the prison ministry. It hit me like a ton of bricks. It was amazingly clear what the Lord wanted. I spent three more days with this Scripture, seeking confirmation.

I’ve been doing the prison ministry for four years now, and I’m still sure that the discernment was clear.

Third Mode of Discernment: Second Way

Mathew: I married in my late twenties, and my wife Denise and I had three children. My career has been in human relations, and I have worked for several companies in this field. In my early forties, I began to feel the call to be a deacon. My wife agreed, and when I was forty-seven I was ordained a permanent deacon.

My bishop assigned me to a large parish where I served as deacon, preaching, doing baptisms, weddings, and burial services. In addition, because of my business background, I was asked to help with the parish school and the renovation of the Church building. I loved all of this service, and as my children grew older, was able to give more time to it. The various projects went well, and the parish grew. But, after thirteen years of this service, together with my human relations job and the needs of the family, I found myself deeply tired. I remember one evening when I first began to wonder whether I could continue as deacon in this parish or whether I might need a change.

I spoke about this with my spiritual director, and he encouraged me to let the bishop know my situation. A few weeks later, I did speak with the bishop, and it was a good conversation. He knew about my situation. He told me that he was happy with my work in the parish and that if I wanted to continue, that would be fine. But he also said that he saw my tiredness and that he wanted me to discern what I thought I should do. He would honor whatever decision I would make.

The bishop’s response was encouraging, and I was willing to discern. Still, to discern about a position I’d had for so long was not easy for me. When I met with my spiritual director, he told me not to try to discern right away--that the issue was to become free enough to choose well. So I continued to pray, and we continued to meet. About five weeks later, when we met, he thought I was free enough then to discern whether I should stay at the parish or ask for another assignment. He suggested that I continue to pray, and that I try St. Ignatius’s third mode of discernment.

A week later I did try it. I sat in the church with a notebook and wrote down the advantages I could see in staying on in this parish, and the disadvantages. I did the same with the possibility of taking another assignment from the bishop. When I considered everything – the fact that I had been in this parish for thirteen years and had given pretty much what I could; the effort it was costing me now just to do the daily work of a deacon there; the real danger that, if I tried to continue, I was likely to get dangerously exhausted and have to stop anyway; the fact that things were in good shape and that there were others who could step in; my sense that I could do more good by a change that would help me start again with new energy rather than dragging in my work the way I was doing – it seemed to me that the greater good was to have someone else take over and that I get a fresh start in another assignment. As far as I could see, following St. Ignatius, this was saying that God’s will was that I should ask the bishop for another assignment. But I still wasn’t sure, and I wasn’t ready to act.

I shared all this with my spiritual director, and he suggested that I now try the second way St. Ignatius gives. About three days later, I did that in the same chapel. When I took the first point – where you think of another person facing the same decision and what you would say to that person – it really hit me. I knew immediately that I would never ask another person to continue in the same ministry with such deep exhaustion. I don’t think I ever went past this first consideration in the second way. This was so clear that I felt I had my answer.

When I shared this a few days later with my spiritual director, he agreed that this seemed very clear. He thought the discernment process was now concluded, that there was nothing more that needed to be done, and that it was time to speak with the bishop.

A few days later I did. The bishop agreed with the discernment and thought that the reasons sounded right. It was the final piece in the discernment. Within a few days I started to feel real happiness, a deep peace about the discernment, a certainty that I was doing God’s will. This was the point I had always wanted to reach in the whole process.

Third Mode of Discernment: Questions to Consider

Before I begin this discernment, have I researched well the options in this choice? Do I *know the relevant data*, so that my consideration of advantages and disadvantages will be solidly rooted in the real situation?

As I begin this discernment, am I truly in a *tranquil time*? Am I able to use my “natural powers” freely and tranquilly?

As I begin, have I renewed my awareness of and desire for the *end* to which this choice is a *means*: to respond with love to God’s infinite love for me, to promote God’s greater glory in human hearts, and to progress toward the joy of eternal communion with God?

Am I spiritually *free*, open to either option, like a balance at equilibrium, ready to choose whatever I will perceive to be for God’s greater glory?

Have I *sought God's help* in prayer before I consider the advantages and disadvantages of either option? Have I carefully considered these? Listed them in writing? Are these *faith-based* reasons, that is, advantages or disadvantages from the perspective of *God's greater glory*?

Do I see *which option* is favored by a preponderance of reasons? Do I see this clearly? If not, have you used the *second way* of the third mode?

Have I shared this process with a *spiritual guide*?

When I have chosen one option, have I brought this choice to God for *confirmation*? Have I received such confirmation?

THE FRUIT OF DISCERNMENT

Sr. Floralba: Forgive me if I haven't written earlier, but I wasn't ready; I wanted to wait for a short while. Having spent so many years in Kikwit, when I arrived I had the feeling of having always been here.... When I visited the hospital, I felt again all the demands of the work.... Yet I said to myself: I did not ask to come here, rather, I never thought they would send me here again since I had been here for twenty-five years. So I am sure that I am in the will of God, and this gives me peace and joy. I try to be with the sick and to help those who are especially ill. Since I have less work, I am trying to be more patient, more kind, more gentle with all. I want in the few years that remain to me to witness to the goodness and merciful love of the Father.

St. Francis of Assisi: Then the hand of the Lord came over St. Francis. As soon as he heard this answer and thereby knew the will of Christ, he got to his feet, all aflame with divine power, and said to Brother Masseo with great fervor, "So let us go – in the name of the Lord!"