

Foundations of Spiritual Discernment According to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola

To Do Your Will!

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A reflection on the Trinitarian foundation of personal or collective spiritual discernment in light of the experience of Saint Ignatius of Loyola and the early fathers of the Society of Jesus. In every discernment, one must personally and collectively position oneself as the Son before the Father, who, through the Spirit, shares the feelings of the Trinity with the person or group. Personal or collective spiritual discernment is primarily an experience of grace, an initiative of the Spirit. The author is the director of the CIS - Ignatian Center of Spirituality of the Euro-Mediterranean province of the Society of Jesus.

To discern is to prepare and dispose the soul to seek and find God's will in the personal and collective life¹. This fundamental attitude presupposes faith in the Triune God, who is present and active within me and all humanity², pouring forth His gifts from above³ through the mediation of Jesus and Mary⁴.

The first person to discern the good to be done here and now – considering the good of myself and others, the dispositions of each person, the state of interpersonal relationships, and the past, present, and future of personal and collective history – is ultimately the Father. Only He intimately knows, through the Spirit and the mediation of Jesus, what is good for me and for all.

Discernment, therefore, is participation in the Father's Trinitarian discernment as He gazes upon the world and accomplishes humanity's redemption through the Incarnation⁵. To seek and find God's will is to receive both a gift and a call: it reveals how the plan of goodness for the present, past, and future of myself and all humanity can be realized here and now through my free assent.

In this divine-human environment – the mystery of Trinitarian life dwelling within and participating in my/our personal and collective life – a dialogue unfolds. On one side, the Father involves me in His discernment; on the other, Jesus allows me to share in His stance before the Father, from whom He awaits and with whom He dialogues about the good to be done here and now: "I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me." (John 17:23).

The Indispensable Trinitarian Foundation

Without an awareness of this Trinitarian foundation of personal and collective life, any spiritual discernment risks becoming ideological illusion, disguised psychological self-realization, vain searching for scientific-technical solutions, or at the very least a subtle manipulation of self and others.

All choices eventually face crises. The meaning of these choices – and the ability to change them if necessary – can only be rediscovered if a discernment process is rooted in the rock of the Trinitarian mystery within my/our life, rather than in myself/ourselves (or worse, in the will of another person or dominant group).

Only by dwelling in this mystery does my freedom remain free, my conscience perceive the Father's will, and my will fulfill it completely. My entire being, participating fully in the divine nature and the love flowing between Father and Son, becomes 'Son in the Son,' and thus like the Father. Only the Son, who is like the Father, knows the Father and is known by the Father. (cf. Luke 10:22). As St. Ignatius often concluded his letters: *"I pray that the Most Holy Trinity, in its infinite and supreme goodness, may grant us abundant grace to perceive His most holy will and fulfill it entirely"⁶.

The "Marian" Posture of Christians and the Church

On this foundation, spiritual discernment becomes a grace-filled event – a process of healing and liberation guided by the Spirit. Yet we must empty ourselves entirely, "standing in the midst"⁷ to be moved by the Father through the Spirit and receive what He desires to place in my/our soul.⁸

This is Jesus' place before the Father – the same attitude St. Ignatius, in the Spiritual Exercises, first asks of the person leading the Exercises for the retreatant⁹, and then of the retreatant before the Father¹⁰. Ultimately, this is the "Marian" posture of the Christian and the Church: To be a nothingness of love to let another live within oneself. When a person or group adopts this stance, immediate communication/relationship/revelation between God Trinity and the creature is fully realized and incarnated in the election/decision. In my experience as a spiritual accompanier, I have rarely encountered individuals or groups who habitually dwell with this disposition of their soul, freely chosen as their fundamental stance of consciousness.

Discernment Rooted in Mystical Experience

Authentic spiritual discernment – personal or collective – is possible only when grounded in a mystical experience. A prime example is St. Ignatius' experience at Manresa, which shaped the decision-making process of Ignatius himself, his first companions, and the entire group, toward founding the Society of Jesus¹¹.

Here is an account of that moment: "One day he went to the Church of St. Paul, situated about a mile from Manresa. Near the road is a stream, on the bank of which he sat, and gazed at the deep waters flowing by. While seated there, the eyes of his soul were opened.

He did not have any special vision, but his mind was enlightened on many subjects, spiritual and intellectual. So clear was this knowledge that from that day everything appeared to him in a new light. Such was the abundance of this light in his mind that all the divine help received, and all the knowledge acquired up to his sixty-second year, were not equal to it. From that day he seemed to be quite a different man and possessed of a new intellect. This illumination lasted a long time. While kneeling in thanksgiving for this grace, there appeared to him that object which he had often seen before but had never understood. It seemed to be something most beautiful, and, as it were, gleaming with many eyes. This is how it always appeared. There was a cross near which he was praying, and he noticed that near the cross that vision had lost some of its former beautiful color. He understood from this that the apparition was the work of the devil, and whenever the vision appeared to him after that, as it did several times, he dispelled it with his staff."¹²

The Gift of Discernment: Fruit of Transformation in Christ

Fr. Pedro Arrupe, once Superior General of the Society of Jesus, reflected: "The Illumination of Cardoner was essentially a summons. Ignatius moved from contemplating the Trinity to contemplating the Trinity's works, aspiring to collaborate in their divine action. This mysticism led him to act. What he perceived – gradually clarified from Cardoner (1522) to La Storta (1537), through his 'Diary' (1544) until his death (1556) – was 'the understanding, in the bosom of the Trinity, the Pauline mystery that all creatures come from God and return to Him. Ignatius saw this rhythm of descent and ascent reflected in creation, humanity's fall, redemption, and the Church. Above all, it illuminated and revealed the mystery of Christ. For Ignatius, Christ was not merely a model of virtues but the One who, ever conscious of coming from the Father and returning to Him, continually contemplates the Father's designs in order to discern – in perfect indifference and openness – what the Father expects from him for the fulfillment of his Work and his greater glory.'" ¹³.

In the vision at Cardoner, Saint Ignatius received the gift of discernment as a fruit of his transformation into Christ by the Holy Spirit. Made "Light of Light," he recognized this Light in all things, discerned the false light of the enemy, and became capable of fulfilling the Father's will. Made the Soul of Christ, Ignatius shared in the Trinity's inner movements. When individuals or groups adopt this disposition – becoming "Souls of Christ" individually and collectively – they experience by grace the Father's will as their own.

The personal and collective experience of this trinitarian foundation and the transformation into Light, together with the correct use of suitable tools to prepare and dispose the Soul (personal or collective) and the honesty of those who play a role of accompaniment or guidance, allows for the realization of an authentic and free process of personal or collective spiritual discernment.

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1. Spiritual Exercises 1, in *The Writings of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, AdP, Rome 2007, 182-183.
 2. Spiritual Exercises 235-236, *ibid.*, 273.
 3. Spiritual Exercises 237, *ibid.*, 273-274.
 4. Spiritual Exercises 218-225, *ibid.*, 268-269.
 5. Spiritual Exercises 106-108, *ibid.*, 227-229.
 6. Letter to Teresa Rejadell, June 18, 1536, *ibid.*, 941.
 7. Spiritual Exercises 179, *ibid.*, 254-255.

8. Spiritual Exercises 180, *ibid.*
9. Spiritual Exercises 15, *ibid.*, 189.
10. Spiritual Exercises 179, *ibid.*, 254-255.
11. See P. Monaco's articles on this topic, e.g., **Seeking God's Will Together: The First Group of Jesuits** (2006).
12. *Autobiography of St. Ignatius*, n. 30 - 31 in *The Writings of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, 22.
13. P. Arrupe, *The Trinitarian Inspiration of the Ignatian Charism* (1980), citing R. Cantin's *The Illumination of Cardoner*, Montreal (1955), 54.