

# ‘THE THING HAS BEEN OF GOD’

## Ignatius’ Experience of God’s Confirmation in His Autobiography

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REFLECTING UPON MY YEARS of directing retreats, giving spiritual direction and teaching the methods of Ignatian spirituality, I have learnt that many people who engage in discernment over important decisions ask about God’s confirmation concerning the fruit of their prayer and reflection. For Ignatius, interpreting or discerning the will of God was not just a matter of the process of coming to a decision, but also of whether the decision was eventually confirmed.

The experience of confirmation is a very significant part of discernment and decision-making, whether through the election or the reformation of life, or in the ordinary decisions of daily life that emerge through the prayer of the examen. From the experience of Ignatius and his insights in *Spiritual Exercises* (Exx 175–177), we learn that God communicates guidance according to ‘three times, each of them suitable for making a sound and good election’, namely,

1. the movement of an immediate awareness ‘without doubting or being able to doubt’;
2. the weighing of interior movements through ‘experience in the discernment of various spirits’; and
3. the use of reason during a time of ‘tranquillity’.

In all these three ways, God desires to communicate confirmation. Yet how do we come to recognise that the results of discernment or decision-making are confirmed by God, and whether our choice is truly the direction in which God is inviting us to go? Expectations about signs that the process of one’s discernment is being confirmed by God are not generally presented in a clear or systematic fashion within the *Spiritual*

*Exercises*, in the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits or in commentaries on decision-making.

However, a set of clear criteria can be found in Ignatius' *Autobiography*, according to a retreat presentation by Cardinal Carlo Martini, given to Jesuits of the California Province during the summer of 1991. Let us examine these criteria through two very significant paragraphs from the *Autobiography* and which are found immediately after Ignatius' description of his conversion story.

And now he was coming to forget his past thoughts with these holy desires he was having. These desires were confirmed for him by a visitation as follows: being awake one night, he saw *clearly* a likeness of Our Lady with the Holy Child Jesus, at the sight of which, for an appreciable time, he received a very extraordinary consolation. He was left so sickened at his whole past life, and especially at matters of the flesh, that it seemed to him that there has been removed from his soul all the likenesses that he had previously had painted on it. Thus from that hour until August 1553, when this is being written, he *never again had even the slightest complicity* in matters of the flesh. On the basis of this effect one can judge that the thing has been of God, although he himself did not venture to define it, nor was he saying more than to affirm the abovesaid. But as a result his brother, like everyone else in the house, gradually *realised from the outside the change* that has been made inwardly in his soul.

He, not troubling himself with anything, was persevering in his reading and his good intentions, and the whole time he spoke with those in the house he used to spend on things of God, with which *he did their souls good*. And, liking those books a lot, he had the idea of extracting certain things, briefly and in their essentials, from the lives of Christ and the saints. And so he set to writing a book with great industry (this had about 300 leaves, all written in quarto) for now he was beginning to get up a bit around the house. The words of Christ were in red ink; those of Our Lady in blue ink. The paper was glazed and ruled, and it was with good lettering, because he was a very good scribe. Part of the time he would spend in writing, part in prayer. And the greatest consolation he used to receive was to look at the sky and the stars, which he did often and for a long time, because with this he used to feel in himself a *great impetus towards serving Our Lord*. He often used to think about his intention, wishing he was already completely well so as to begin on his way.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Autobiography*, nn. 10–11 (emphasis mine; subsequent references in the text).

At an initial glance, these paragraphs may seem like a simple narrative. But at the beginning of this section, in which Ignatius is putting his conversion experience and the effects of its ‘afterglow’ into perspective, he clearly states that he is describing, from experience, objective signs of God’s confirmation of the new direction of his life: these ‘desires were confirmed for him by a visitation’ and ‘on the basis of this effect one can judge that the thing has been of God’.



*Ignatius' vision of the Virgin Mary, by Peter Paul Rubens, 1609*

These two paragraphs, dictated near the end of his life and reflecting upon a lifetime of discernment, present Ignatius’ mature understanding of God’s confirmation during the period immediately after his conversion at Loyola castle while he was still recovering from his wounds.

According to Cardinal Martini, these two key paragraphs in the *Autobiography* contain five objective criteria for judging whether one is being led and confirmed by the spirit of God through any of the ‘three times’ when we encounter God’s influence during decision-making. In order to understand what Ignatius is communicating about the nature of confirmation, we need to pay close attention to the *genre* of the narrative, through the carefully selected stories both in these two paragraphs and elsewhere in the *Autobiography*.

Through the example of his life experience, and reflecting thirty years after the initial composition of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius lays out in these two significant paragraphs from his *Autobiography* a more specific or developed presentation of the topic of God’s confirmation. In them, Ignatius describes five basic criteria for confirmation:

1. Clarity, for God is not opaque (he saw *clearly* a likeness);
2. Persistence, for God is not fickle (he *never again had even the slightest complicity*);

3. Outward manner (*realised from the outside the change that has been made inwardly in his soul*);
4. Profit to others (*he did their souls good*);
5. Desire to serve (*great impetus towards serving Our Lord*).

These five criteria for confirmation provide a very valuable and objective filter by which one can understand the whole of the *Autobiography* as a spiritual document. Not all of the five may apply to each instance of discernment that Ignatius has chosen to record for our benefit and example in this dictated document. One or two criteria for confirmation may apply rather than the others in any given situation. But the applied wisdom of what Ignatius presents is illustrated by examples that immediately follow within the narrative of the *Autobiography*.

And taking stock as to what he would do after he came back from Jerusalem so as always to live in penance, it occurred to him to go into the Charterhouse in Seville, without saying who he was so that they would take less notice of him, and there never to eat anything except herbs. But whenever he returned once more to thinking about the penances he wanted to do while wandering through the world, the *desire for the Charterhouse would go cold on him*. (nn. 16–17)

Joining the Carthusian monastic community in Seville is certainly a good choice in its outward manner. For Ignatius, this choice was initially attractive for a variety of reasons. But the desire gradually ‘would go cold on him’. Ignatius realised that this strictly monastic manner of religious life was not the direction in which God was leading him since his initial and enthusiastic desire was not long-lasting.

Shortly thereafter, as Ignatius began his journey across northern Spain with the ultimate aim of reaching Jerusalem, he encountered a Moor on the road and the two travellers fell into a long conversation. As he only describes two personal encounters in such great detail in his *Autobiography*, let us read the narrative of this rather complex example concerning the discovery and application of various contrary spirits working within his life. In this narrative, Ignatius refers to himself in the third person as ‘the pilgrim’.

So then, as he was going on his way a Moor caught up with him, a rider on his mule; and as the two of them were going along in conversation, they came to talk about Our Lady. And the Moor was saying that he could well accept that the Virgin had conceived in the absence

of a man, but he couldn't believe in her having given birth while remaining a virgin, offering for this the natural reasons that were occurring to him. Despite the many arguments which the pilgrim gave him, he couldn't dislodge this opinion. At that the Moor went ahead, with such great speed that he lost sight of him as he remained thinking about what had passed with the Moor.

And at this there came upon him some impulses creating disturbance in his soul; it seemed to him he had not done his duty. And these caused him anger also against the Moor; it seemed to him that he had done wrong in allowing that a Moor should say such things of Our Lady, and he was obliged to stand up for her honour. And thus there coming upon him desires to go and find the Moor, and stab him for what he'd said.

Carrying on a long time with the conflict aroused by these desires, in the end he remained doubtful, not knowing what his duty was. The Moor, who had gone on ahead, had told him that he was going to a place which was a little further along his own route, very near the main road, but the main road did not go through the place. So, having tired of analysing what it would be good to do, and not finding anything definite on what to decide, he decided on this: namely, to let the mule go on a loose rein up to the point where the roads divided. And if the mule went down the town road, he would look for the Moor and stab him; and if he didn't go towards the town but went along the main road, he'd let him be. He acted in accord with this thought, and Our Lord willed that, though the town was little more than thirty or forty paces away, and the road leading to it very broad and very good, the mule took the main road, and left the one for the town behind. (n. 15)

This well-known incident illustrates the immaturity of Ignatius' spiritual understanding, despite his recent conversion. 'In allowing that a Moor should say such things of Our Lady', Ignatius was tempted to 'stab him for what he'd said'.

Although he did not understand at the time the nature of his underlying habits of violence and evil, Ignatius thought very little about the morality of defending the honour of Our Lady through violence, not realising that the 'outward manner' of this action was contrary to God's will. However, he was led to hesitate, owing to 'the conflict aroused by these desires', which left him confused. In 1527, Ignatius erroneously thought that God worked through the capricious decision of the mule. With the wisdom gained from his experience at Manresa, only later did the more spiritually mature Ignatius realise that God was labouring for



*Ignatius and the Moor, by Peter Paul Rubens, 1609*

him through the various ‘conflictual’ and ‘doubtful’ feelings that he experienced, ‘having tired of analysing’ and lacking clarity. This incident with the Moor illustrates a decision made according to the ‘second time’, that is, ‘the experience in the discernment of various spirits’. This encounter also exemplifies the absence of God’s confirmation, in the lack of clarity and obvious want of a good ‘outward manner’ presented by the temptation to stab a fellow traveller.

Both stories—of Ignatius’ initial attraction to the Carthusians and this incident with the Moor—exemplify the absence of confirmation from God concerning the choices faced by Ignatius shortly after his conversion. But what about examples where God does give confirmation to the choices of Ignatius according to the criteria identified by Cardinal Martini? The remainder of the *Autobiography* illustrates Ignatius’ gradual growth in identifying and understanding the criteria for God’s confirmation, principally after his enlightenment at the River Cardoner.

After his period of conversion at Loyola, Ignatius sought the specific direction in which God was calling him. In addition to communicating with God through prayer, labouring in God’s vineyard through the service of others gradually emerged as the primary means of union with God’s will. But the manner of that service was elusive for Ignatius. In the year after his conversion (1523), during his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, his desire to stay and minister there was frustrated by the Franciscan superiors in the Holy Land for a variety of practical reasons. In coming to terms with this disappointing change of plans, Ignatius learnt much about the process both of discernment and confirmation.

His firm intention was to remain in Jerusalem, forever visiting those holy places. And, as well as this matter of devotion, he also had the

intention of helping souls .... The Guardian replied that he couldn't see how his stay would be possible, because the house was in such great need that it couldn't support the friars, and for this reason he had decided to send some of them with the pilgrims back here .... The Provincial told him, using kind words, how he had learnt of his good intention of remaining in those holy places, that he had thought a good deal about the matter, and that, from the experience that he had of others, it was his judgement that it would not be appropriate. For many people had had this desire, and then one had been taken prisoner, another had died, and then the order had been left having to ransom the prisoners. (nn.45-46)

One can imagine how the headstrong Ignatius reacted to this obstacle. But the variety of reasons enumerated by the Franciscan Guardian and the Franciscan Provincial possessed the quality of 'clarity'. Ignatius learnt from this traumatic change in his plans that he must listen to the thoughts and feelings of others in order to make a balanced and good discernment. Hereafter, even though he might disagree with their judgment, he would always obey superiors when their reasons had the quality of clarity.

Since his long-held plans and dreams were thwarted in the Holy Land, the pilgrim Ignatius still wondered what God was calling him to do. Upon his return to Europe, Ignatius made a momentous decision for his future.

Once the said pilgrim had understood that it was God's will he should not be in Jerusalem, he had constantly had with him thoughts about what was to be done. In the end he was inclining more towards studying for a time in order to be able to help souls, and was coming to the decision to go to Barcelona. (n.49)

Once the door to remaining in Jerusalem was closed to Ignatius, labouring in God's vineyard through the service of others emerged in his spirituality as the primary criterion for being in union with God's will. Ignatius realised that he must expand his knowledge through formal study in order to serve others and God more effectively. This decision was confirmed by both Ignatius' friend Isabel Roser and Master Ardèvol, his Latin tutor. 'To both this seemed very good.' (n.54) This additional experience of confirmation by others affirmed for Ignatius their importance in the process of discernment.

His disappointment in Jerusalem was not the only roadblock that Ignatius faced during his long journey to discover 'what was to be done'.

While studying in Alcalá and Salamanca from 1526 to 1528, he was investigated several times by the Inquisition, underwent three ecclesiastical trials and was accused of preaching without sufficient learning (nn. 58–63). In 1528, Ignatius journeyed to Paris to restart his studies in an environment where he could speak more freely about his spiritual experiences. Through spiritual conversation, he gradually began to attract a handful of permanent companions, initially his room-mates Francis Xavier and Pierre Favre ‘whom he later won for the service of God by means of the Exercises’ (n.82).

Ignatius was greatly encouraged by the profit that people received from the Spiritual Exercises. Observing the fruitful responses in Francis, Pierre and others, Ignatius was greatly confirmed in the direction of his ministry. Through the shared experience of the Exercises, others joined their number so that, eventually, seven like-minded companions pronounced private vows of chastity and poverty at Montmartre in Paris on 15 August 1534. Celebrating their vows, these seven companions also promised to journey to Jerusalem,

... to spend their lives in what was beneficial to souls. And if permission was not given them to remain in Jerusalem, they were to return to Rome and present themselves to Christ’s vicar, so he could employ them wherever he judged more for the glory of God and the good of souls. (n.85)

Owing to warfare in the Mediterranean between the Venetian republic and the Turkish empire, the companions waited in Venice for a year, and Ignatius’ plan to preach in Jerusalem was once again frustrated. The companions travelled to Rome to fulfil the second part of their vow to place themselves at the service of the Pope.

And being one day in a church some miles before arrival in Rome, and making prayer, [Ignatius] sensed such a change in his soul, and he saw so clearly that God the Father was putting him with Christ, his Son, that he would not have the willfulness to have any doubt about this: it could only be that God the Father was putting him with his Son. (n.96)

This strong contemplative prayer experience in the little church at La Storta became the confirmation that Ignatius had sought for the previous seventeen years concerning the specific direction to which God was calling him. It also presents a clear example of the first ‘suitable time for



making a sound and good election’, the movement of an immediate awareness ‘without doubting or being able to doubt’.

For seventeen years after his conversion, Ignatius searched for ‘what was to be done’, in a spiritual pilgrimage of discernment which culminated with the experience of confirmation, above all in his contemplative prayer at La Storta. Luis Gonçalves da Câmara’s epilogue to the *Autobiography* gives the summary and final goal of Ignatius’ spiritual progress: ‘... always growing in devotion, i.e. in facility in finding God, and now more than ever in his whole life. And in every time and hour he wanted to find God, he found him.’ (n.99)

For an apostolically orientated spirituality such as Ignatius’, nothing is more confirming than accurately discovering with clarity how God is specifically and intimately labouring in one’s life through one’s daily choices of service, faith and love. In my own pastoral experience of spiritual direction, teaching and spiritual conversation, the communication and application of the five criteria isolated by Cardinal Martini has brought fruitful clarity and profit to many people in their decision-making and in the process of individual and communal discernment.

These five practical and wise criteria provide an important filter for reading the entirety of the *Autobiography* and for understanding its spiritual significance. Most of the major decisions faced by Ignatius and subsequently included in his *Autobiography* can be understood in light of these five criteria for confirmation, including his struggles with scruples and excessive fasting at Manresa (nn. 21–25); his wonder and extraordinary consolations while trying to study or sleep (n.26); his ministry of spiritual conversation during his days of detention (n.67); the sorting out of his emotions on his way to Rouen to visit the sick Spaniard (n.79); and the



Ignatius’ vision at La Storta, by Peter Paul Rubens, 1609

dilemma over paying a gold crown in order to receive his diploma at Paris (n.84).

I also propose that these same five criteria can be fruitfully applied in distinguishing between ‘false consolation’ and ‘true consolation’ in consideration of the Second Week Rules for the Discernment of Spirits (Exx 332–336). The history of Ignatius’ discovery of discernment, and also how his decisions were confirmed by God within the *Autobiography*, becomes a model for us in our discovery of, and our response to, God’s presence and work in our lives.

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