

# THE WAY

*a review of Christian spirituality published by the British Jesuits*

*October 2019*

*Volume 58, Number 4*

## TOWARDS A DISCERNING CHURCH



© Catholic Church England

*Prayer vigil ahead of the Synod on the Family, 2015*

**Foreword** 5–6

**Discernment as a Work of the Church** 7–16

*Nicholas Austin*

The spiritual pathway that traces its origins to St Ignatius of Loyola has sometimes been presented as if it had a monopoly on discernment. Yet, as Pope Francis repeatedly stresses, discernment is a gift of the Spirit to the whole Church. Here moral theologian Nicholas Austin considers what happens when discernment ‘goes live’ in this setting.

**Ecology, Evolutionary Anthropology and Discernment in Deep Time** 17–31

*Celia Deane-Drummond*

In recent years Christians have become increasingly aware that their faith needs to address the environmental challenges facing the whole of humanity. However, it is not clear how this can be done most effectively. Celia Deane-Drummond, Director of the new *Laudato si'* Research Institute in Oxford, suggests that looking back towards early human origins is one useful response.

**Understanding the Experience of God with St Augustine** 33–42

*Edward Howells*

St Augustine argued that God is ‘more inward to me than my innermost self’, and several of his writings explore the implications of this idea. Edward Howells considers what this means for our attempts to understand more fully our own experience of God, concluding that this experience is by no means simply an intellectual matter.

**Decision or Discernment? Spiritual Tools in Education** 43–58

*Adrian Porter*

For centuries, Jesuit schools have constituted one of the largest single, coherent international education system in the world. It takes constant renewal to maintain this position, and here Adrian Porter, the British Provincial’s delegate for education, describes how an active emphasis on discernment is influencing the current generation of teachers and pupils in these institutions.

**Ten Rules for Ecological Discernment**

59–69

*Walter Ceyssens*

In the course of his Spiritual Exercises St Ignatius offers a number of sets of rules or guidelines to help retreatants continue to live out what they have experienced in prayer after the retreat. Taking inspiration from these, Walter Ceyssens suggests ten such practical rules that could be of use to those wanting to respond to present-day ecological concerns.

**Towards a Greater Sense of Reality: Ignatian Discernment between Spiritual Life and Mission**

70–80

*Patrick Goujon*

Patrick Goujon seeks here ‘to sketch out the three actions involved in discernment: to feel; to pray and to decide; to act’. He insists, however, that the discernment process can only be understood from within the movement of everyday life, and shows how the Jesuit *Constitutions* provide worked examples of how this can operate.

**A Workshop on Vocational Discernment**

81–84

*Ruth Holgate*

As well as the main papers collected here, the conference at St Beuno’s that provided material for this special issue of *The Way* involved a number of practical workshops. In the one described here, Ruth Holgate invited participants to consider how people (especially young adults) working to discern their basic vocations in life can best be helped, with the assistance of trained guides.

**Accompanying the Young in Their Development**

85–97

*David Cabrera*

David Cabrera has long experience of offering psychological and spiritual accompaniment to young people. In this article he considers what is distinctive about this, recognising dialogue and companionship as key elements. This also has implications, traced here, for anyone who would seek to provide such accompaniment.

**Spiritual Discernment: The Horizon That Is God**

99–110

*Mark Rotsaert*

Far from being a rarefied, esoteric experience, Mark Rotsaert suggests, discernment is a process that is as old, and now as universal, as humanity itself: a fundamental capacity on which we all draw. It always takes place within the context of ‘the horizon that is God’, with consequences that are investigated in this essay.

**Discerning with Others (Christian or Not) for an Integral Ecology in Action**

111–127

*Cécile Renouard*

Most people today live in highly complex societies which face large-scale, seeming intractable, challenges. For discernment to be of use here it needs to move beyond the simply individual, and has to develop a collective dimension. In doing this, the virtue of detachment comes to the fore, as Cécile Renouard demonstrates.

**FOR AUTHORS**

*The Way* warmly invites readers to submit articles with a view to publication. They should normally be about 4,000 words long, and be in keeping with the journal's aims. The Editor is always ready to discuss possible ideas.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Cover design by Peter Brook SJ; cover illustration © *Pentecost* by Mark Wiggin. We are grateful to the editors of *Manresa* for permission to publish the translation of David Cabrera's article. The scripture quotations herein are generally from the New Revised Standard Version Bible © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, and are used by permission. All rights reserved.

**ABBREVIATIONS**

<i>Autobiography</i>	'Reminiscences (Autobiography)', in <i>Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings</i> , translated by Philip Endean and Joseph A. Munitiz (London: Penguin, 1996)
<i>Constitutions</i>	in <i>The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms</i> (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996)
<i>Diary</i>	'The Spiritual Diary', in <i>Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings</i> , translated by Philip Endean and Joseph A. Munitiz (London: Penguin, 1996)
<i>Dir</i>	<i>On Giving the Spiritual Exercises: The Early Manuscript Directories and the Official Directory of 1599</i> , translated and edited by Martin E. Palmer (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996)
<i>Exx</i>	<i>The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius</i> , translated by George E. Ganss (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992)
<i>GC</i>	General Congregation, in <i>Jesuit Life and Mission Today: The Decrees and Accompanying Documents of the 31st – 35th General Congregations of the Society of Jesus</i> (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2009) and <i>Jesuit Life and Mission Today: The Decrees and Accompanying Documents of the 36th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus</i> (Boston: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2017).
<i>MHSJ</i>	Monumenta Historica Societatis Jesu, 157 volumes (Madrid and Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Iesu, 1898–)

*Papal documents may be found at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)*



## FOREWORD

IN MARCH 2019 around sixty people, including both academics and practitioners, gathered at St Beuno's Jesuit Spirituality Centre in north Wales for a conference entitled *Towards a Discerning Church*. This was seen as one response to Pope Francis's insistence that 'today the Church needs to grow in discernment, in the ability to discern'.<sup>1</sup> The papers from this conference form the core of this special issue of *The Way*. One concern that repeatedly emerged at the conference was the need for discernment in dealing with the current environmental challenges facing the whole of humanity; another was its importance to young people as they find their way in the world.

Discernment is sometimes presented as if it were some esoteric process, only able to be practised by skilled adepts. On the contrary, Mark Rotsaert argues, it is a normal human way of pondering and reasoning, as old and as widespread as humanity itself. Nevertheless it can only really be adequately understood against 'the horizon that is God'. Edward Howells follows St Augustine in looking inwards for this horizon, discovering the experience of God in tracing back from our experience of ourselves. Nicholas Austin set the scene for the conference as a whole, and here he looks at what it means to be a discerning Church, and what happens when this moves from being a theoretical idea to a lived reality. In his contribution Patrick Goujon also emphasizes the need for discernment to be rooted in the experience of everyday life, showing how the Jesuit *Constitutions* provide worked examples of this in practice.

The presence at the conference of a number of speakers and delegates whose daily work is as trained spiritual guides and directors ensured that the practical side of discernment is well represented here. Ruth Holgate's focus, which provided the foundation of a conference workshop, is the accompaniment of young adults attempting to discern their own basic vocation in life. This sits well alongside the essay by David Cabrera, translated from our Spanish sister journal *Manresa*, which speaks of how dialogue and companionship take on a particular importance at this stage of the life journey. Adrian Porter demonstrates some ways in practices

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, address to Jesuits in Poland, 30 July 2016, quoted in Pope Francis and Antonio Spadaro, *Open to God, Open to the World*, translated by Shaun Whiteside (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 174.

of discernment are being applied within the context of Jesuit education, particularly among teenagers in schools. And Walter Ceyssens follows the lead of St Ignatius himself who, in writing the *Spiritual Exercises*, included a number of sets of guidelines for those wanting to continue living out what they had experienced in their retreat when they returned to their everyday occupations. Ceyssens outlines ten practical rules to guide discernment in relation to ecological concerns.

In recent years what once seemed like individual problems, such as climate change, species extinction and soil degradation, have coalesced for many into a pervasive sense of a looming environmental crisis. Faced with this crisis it is easy to feel powerless, as if nothing I, or even we, can do will make any difference. This, then, becomes a test case for discernment. Is it possible to discover the will of God even here, and draw from that practical conclusions as to how to act and respond? Two of the contributions in this issue concentrate particularly on these questions. Celia Deane-Drummond takes a perhaps surprising approach, drawing on our developing knowledge of the earliest stages of human history. Cécile Renouard argues for a more collective dimension to the discernment process, one which, she believes, will bring to the fore the need for the spiritual characteristic of detachment or indifference.

A classic caricature has long suggested that the role of laypeople in the Church is simply to 'pay, pray and obey', following rules and commandments handed to them by the clergy. A discerning Church is clearly the polar opposite of this, drawing on the insights of everyone, lay and clerical, male and female, young and old, to come to the clearest possible view of where and how God's Spirit is at work in our world, and how we can best use the gifts that each of us has been given to further this work. With the widespread desire to find more effective ways of protecting the environment as a test case for this approach, the need for the Church to be truly a discerning body has never been clearer. It is our hope that this issue of *The Way* will have provided pointers to how that might become more of a reality.

**Paul Nicholson SJ**  
**Editor**

# DISCERNMENT AS A WORK OF THE CHURCH

Nicholas Austin

## ***Becoming the Discerning Church***

A YEAR AGO, I gave a series of three talks on the discerning Church to a group of Catholic students and academics. On the first evening, I spoke about Pope Francis's exhortation *Amoris laetitia* (The Joy of Love), because of its theme of discernment. The document had followed two synods of bishops that addressed the contemporary crisis in the family. One especially difficult issue raised from the outset, which had received much media attention, concerned communion for those remarried after divorce. Rather than offering a universal or canonical norm, the bishops and Pope Francis found the way forward in the practice of discernment.

Given the diversity of situations, the application of a set of rules without discernment is not sufficient to find what God is asking of a person here and now: only 'careful discernment of particular cases' can do that.<sup>1</sup> Motivated by mercy, therefore, pastors need to learn how to accompany people and exercise a pastoral discernment that seeks to integrate people more deeply into the life of the Church.<sup>2</sup> Pastors, moreover, are called to 'form consciences, not to replace them' since the faithful 'are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations'.<sup>3</sup> What Pope Francis advocates in his exhortation on the family, then, is formation in discernment, for both pastors and laypeople.

I was somewhat taken aback by the reaction of the audience I was addressing. As a Jesuit moral theologian, I am not used to being accused of heterodoxy for defending what the Pope says. *The Church is just confusing people*, one person complained, *People will think that anything goes*. Another said, *This is a disaster: it's overturning doctrine*. Yet another appealed to a well-known theologian who, he said, had shown that Pope Francis was

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, nn. 79, 304.

<sup>2</sup> *Amoris laetitia*, chapter 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Amoris laetitia*, n. 37.



leading people into heresy. Some were clearly quite angry with the Pope, and with me. For some, the appeal to discernment where there was a perceived need for clarity was disconcerting. They preferred what they saw as St Pope John Paul II's prophetic clarity on moral issues and his own insistence that communion was not be offered to the remarried. Some things are black or white, and it does not help to get caught in the grey.

I stayed behind after the talk and I heard from others who were more encouraged by Pope Francis's message. *In complex situations, is it not precisely discernment that we most need?* Another said, *Pope Francis is right: mercy is the only way.* Yet another commented, *For those who work with people pastorally, this is very inspiring.* I was also acutely conscious that there were those in the group who had said nothing, either in the plenary discussion or to me personally. I wondered what they were thinking.

Fortunately, I had most of the next day to make sense of the responses and prepare my second evening talk. I spent time in prayer. I tried to discern a way forward. Eventually, I tore up the talk I had prepared on the character of discernment and decided to do something different. I began the next session by saying,

*It is great that we have such different voices, because it means that our topic has just gone live. The discerning Church is no longer just an academic question. For we, in this lecture room, are a microcosm of the Church. Some voices are saying one thing, others another, and still others are yet to speak. There are different voices, and there are diverse spirits moving us. So, we have no choice but to discern. Our task is no longer just to discuss a topic of shared curiosity; we have to become, here and now, the discerning Church ourselves.*

The challenge that faced that group of students and academics is, I believe, the challenge that faces the whole Church, as we attempt to understand better where the Lord is calling us in the manifold challenges of our day: not just to talk or write about the discerning Church, but to begin together to become the discerning Church.

*The Early Church in Process*

The Church is called to discernment, but it is always in the process of learning how to do it better. For evidence of this ecclesial fact, we can turn to the Acts of the Apostles, which recounts, among other things, the story of the early Church as it learns to become a community guided by the Holy Spirit.

In the very first chapter of Acts, we find the disciples facing their first test after the risen Lord has left them: whom should they elect as an apostle to replace Judas? They begin well: they choose two people who had accompanied Jesus and the disciples from the baptism of John until the resurrection itself, of which they could be witnesses. They continue well: they turn to prayer to ask for guidance from the Lord. So far so good. Then what? They cast lots.

Should we accept the casting of lots as a good method of discernment? After all, it has precedent in the Bible, precisely as a method of decision-making that the first apostles used. While the Church has generally been against the casting of lots, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and others have not precluded the possibility that, in a case of last resort, and done with due reverence, the practice might be legitimate, as when it is necessary to choose one out of a group to stay behind in a time of persecution.<sup>4</sup> In the case of electing someone to an important office, there may not be any great harm in choosing between two good candidates by lot, and there may even be some advantages to the procedure. The Coptic Orthodox Church, in its process of choosing the Coptic Pope, uses the casting of lots in the final part of the process of election, to choose between three agreed-upon candidates.

Yet, generally speaking, casting lots does not amount to a reliable method of discerning God's will. It is good to recall that, at this point in the Church's early history, as recorded in the first chapter of Acts, the disciples are post-ascension but still pre-pentecost. The believers cast lots to choose the twelfth apostle because they neither have the Lord to

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 2.2, q.95, a.9.

guide them, nor have yet fully received the gift of the Holy Spirit. They have yet to learn how to be led by the Spirit. This early Church, like our own today, cannot yet claim to be the discerning Church.

The narrative continues. By the time we reach chapter 15 of Acts, the community is faced with a major test. It arises, not from the outside, but from the inside. Some Pharisee Christians have been telling the gentile converts that unless they are circumcised and adopt the Jewish dietary laws, they cannot be saved. Paul and Barnabas are furious, sensing that, if every Christian must observe the whole of the Law, the mission to the gentiles will be endangered. They appeal to James and the elders in Jerusalem to resolve the issue, and the Council of Jerusalem is convoked.<sup>5</sup>

Note that the dispute involves a clash between radically differing perspectives on the Christian life. The two groups involved are not merely in conflict over a matter of church discipline: there is a fundamental theological disagreement over how we are saved. For the Pharisees, we are saved by doing God's will as revealed in the Torah; for Paul and Barnabas, we are saved by grace.

What is fascinating about the first Council of the Church is that, despite the fundamental theological issue at stake, rational arguments do not offer a resolution. Both sides can argue cogently from scripture. The Pharisees can quote from the Law, just as their opponents can quote the prophets who see salvation reaching all nations. The elders, therefore, need to adopt a different method, an alternative to mere debate.

Their solution is to listen. First, according to Luke's account, they listen to Peter's testimony, based on his encounter with the gentile convert Cornelius. Then there is a beautiful description of an attentive silence that falls upon the Council: 'The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles' (Acts 15:12). Notice, then, that the elders of the Council are not just listening: they are listening *for* something, namely, signs of the action of the Holy Spirit.

This is what issues in the discernment and resolves the question. Through actively listening for the work of the Spirit, they recognise that Christ's Spirit is already active among the gentiles who have been baptized, even those who are not circumcised. James issues a letter that concedes something to the Pharisees, perhaps to keep them on board,

<sup>5</sup> My reading of this chapter has been influenced by J. Lyle Story, 'The Jerusalem Council: A Pivotal and Instructive Paradigm', *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership*, 3/1 (Winter 2010), 33–60.

but fundamentally allows the gentiles to continue in the Church without circumcision and the whole weight of the Jewish Law. The Council also confirms the ministry of Paul and Barnabas by sending leaders among the community to accompany them to Antioch. The consequences of this freeing, Spirit-led ecclesial discernment are still with us today.

In taking the Council of Jerusalem as an exemplar of the discerning Church for today, a word of caution is necessary. Luke's account, while it does not entirely hide some of the loose ends left by the discernment, nevertheless does have the feel of an idealized narrative. In contrast, the account of what is apparently the same event in Galatians 2:1–10 is followed by Paul's mention of his frank opposition to Cephas (normally assumed to be Peter), who, he claimed, had drawn back from the gentiles because he was afraid of the group advocating circumcision (Galatians 2:11–14). There was tension even between Peter and Paul on this issue, and Paul was not reticent about challenging Peter to his face. This may suggest to us today that discernment in the Church does not always happen in ideal conditions of mutual attentiveness and unanimity. At times what Brian Grogan has called a 'noisy discernment' may be needed.<sup>6</sup> Yet the core practice, whether peaceful or noisy, surely remains normative: to strive together, as Church, to discern where the Spirit is leading.

### *The Synodal Church Today*

What we see in the early Church we see also in the Church today, namely, the Church in the process of becoming the discerning Church, a Church able to identify the work of the Holy Spirit among us and to follow its lead. In my talk to the students and academics, what we collectively realised is that trying to force one's view on others does not resolve anything. We had to stop broadcasting and start listening to each other, especially to those who had not yet spoken. Bit by bit, our conversation changed from the shrill sound of argumentative debate to one of mutual attentiveness and respect. We began listening to each other because we were listening for the Spirit of Christ. We began speaking differently, also, with more humility and less concern to have our own viewpoint vindicated. I believe we learnt more about where God is leading the Church than if we had continued without a discerning way of proceeding.

The need for a discerning Church is a key emphasis of Pope Francis's reform. I first learnt of this, not from a Jesuit, but from a Dominican. In

<sup>6</sup> See Gerard F. O'Hanlon, *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis: A Synodal Catholic Church in Ireland?* (Dublin: Messenger, 2018), 105 note.



February 2014, I found myself sitting in a church in Belfast listening to Timothy Radcliffe, former Master of the Dominicans, talk about Pope Francis's agenda for the reform of the Church. He had just come from a meeting with the Pope. Fr Timothy was convinced, he said, that Francis believed that radical change was necessary, but that he did not have a blueprint or a checklist. What Francis wanted, he said, was a Church 'sensitive to the least breath of the Holy Spirit', a Church that was open to being led by 'the unpredictability of grace'.

We see this emphasis on the discerning Church in Pope Francis's reform of the synod, the regular meeting of the bishops from around the world that assists the Pontiff in his governance and teaching. The synod was founded by Pope Paul VI as a way of continuing the spirit of the Second Vatican Council.<sup>7</sup> On its fiftieth anniversary, Francis set out his own vision, telling the bishops that the synod is 'one of the most precious legacies of the Second Vatican Council' and explaining that it is a key aspect of his ministry as Pope to 'enhance' it. The synod is meant to be an 'image' of the council and is 'to reflect its spirit and method'.<sup>8</sup>

Francis's vision for the synodal Church reflects the language of discernment.



*A meeting of the synod of bishops*

<sup>7</sup> Paul VI, *Apostolica sollicitudo*, 15 September 1965.

<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis, address on the fiftieth anniversary of the synod of bishops, 17 October 2015.



A synodal Church is a Church of listening. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn: the faithful, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome; each listening to the others; and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the 'Spirit of truth' (John 14:17), to know what he 'says to the Churches' (Revelation 2:7).<sup>9</sup>

A synodal Church, then, is a discerning Church, in which everyone listens to each other, in order to listen to the Holy Spirit.

One condition of the discerning, synodal Church, for Francis, is not merely listening, but speaking. He recounts how a cardinal had written to him saying that it was a shame that some bishops declined to say certain things, either out of respect for the Pope or fear he would disagree. Francis responds, 'This is not good, this is not synodality, because it is necessary to say all that, in the Lord, one feels the need to say: without polite deference, without hesitation'.<sup>10</sup> Francis employs an important New Testament word to insist that the bishops should speak with frankness: *parrhesia*.

*Parrhesia* is bold, frank, free speech.<sup>11</sup> It is the kind of speech displayed by the apostles after pentecost. As Francis tells the synod bishops, 'I ask of you, please, to employ these approaches as brothers in the Lord: speaking with *parrhesia* and listening with humility'.<sup>12</sup> The reason that *parrhesia* is necessary for community discerning together is that the Spirit may use the voice of any one of the participants to speak its own message. As Francis puts it elsewhere, 'In the Synod, the Spirit speaks by means of the tongue of every person, who lets himself be guided by God, who always surprises'.<sup>13</sup> Not to be ready to speak with boldness and frankness would not be a sign of true humility, but a pusillanimous lack of willingness to be used by the Spirit for the good of all.

The word *synod*, Francis explains, comes from the Greek *sun hodos*, and literally means 'journeying together'. He insists that *synodality* is not just for the bishops, but for the whole Church: it should characterize the Church at every level. One sign of his commitment to the synodality of the whole Church is his decision that the two synods on the family be preceded by an attempt to consult all the lay faithful. While this consultation was not always done well, it is a remarkable thing that it

<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, address on the fiftieth anniversary.

<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis, 'Greeting to the Synod Fathers during the First General Congregation of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops', 6 October 2014.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed definition, see *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, abridged edn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> Pope Francis, 'Greeting to the Synod Fathers'.

<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis, introductory remarks to the Synod for the Family, 5 October 2015.

was done at all. The theological rationale for the consultation is Francis's pneumatological approach to ecclesiology: since every baptized person has received the Holy Spirit, potentially every Christian has the capacity to discern the voice of the Spirit. Francis explains:

As part of his mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith—*sensus fidei*—which helps them to discern what is truly of God. The presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities, and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the wherewithal to give them precise expression.<sup>14</sup>

To fail to consult the faithful, to listen to their sense of the faith, to their discernment of what is of God and what is not, is to close the Church off from many tongues through which the Spirit may choose to speak. However, the obligation here falls not merely on the bishops, to listen with humility and with an open heart, but also on the laity, to be ready to speak with *parrhesia*. The theologian Gerry O'Hanlon confirms that discernment is the 'key factor' in Francis's programme of reform and his advocacy of a synodal Church. He states:

At the heart of this reform lies a personal and communal discernment of what it is God wants of our Church now, a discernment that takes account in its formation of doctrine of the 'sense of the faithful' (not least popular piety and the voice of the poor), the voice of theologians, and the authoritative role of pope and bishops. It also allows for lay participation in the Church governance. The potential for change in this more inclusive ecclesial way of proceeding is enormous.<sup>15</sup>

Pope Francis recognises, then, that the whole Church is called to become discerning. 'Today the Church needs to grow in discernment, in the ability to discern'.<sup>16</sup> His reforms are motivated by a desire for a more discerning Church, in the bishops' synods, the local church, the parish pastoral council, pastoral accompaniment and, ultimately, the consciences of individual Christians. As Francis puts it, 'Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out'.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 119.

<sup>15</sup> Gerry O'Hanlon, 'Reforming the Catholic Church', address to We Are Church Ireland, 27 May 2017, available at <http://wearechurchireland.ie/reforming-the-catholic-church/>, accessed 20 September 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Pope Francis, address to Jesuits in Poland, 30 July 2016, quoted in Pope Francis and Antonio Spadaro, *Open to God, Open to the World*, translated by Shaun Whiteside (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 174.

<sup>17</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 20.

### ***The Role of the Ignatian Family***

The Ignatian family has a special role in responding to Pope Francis's call for a more discerning Church. Ignatius Loyola's first experience of spiritual discernment, as he lay on his invalid's bed in the castle at Loyola, changed his life. 'His eyes were opened a little', and he became the Pilgrim, searching through discernment for the path of true consolation and enduring joy.<sup>18</sup> As well as clearly having the gift of discernment himself, he was especially good at teaching it to others, and his Spiritual Exercises form an intensive school of discernment. Within the Ignatian tradition today many thousands of people are helped in their relationships with God and their key life-decisions by this simple yet deep practice. This is why, according to the Thirty-Sixth Jesuit General Congregation, discernment is part of that 'special gift Jesuits and the Ignatian family have to offer to the Church'.<sup>19</sup> And yet, like the early Church, we are still learning about discernment, still trying to find out what the discerning Church might look like. Above all, like them, we are still in the process of becoming the discerning Church.

Another word of caution is necessary here, lest our Ignatian enthusiasm for discernment become self-defeating. For while the Ignatian family has a specific role in forming others in discernment, to overidentify discernment with the Ignatian would be to place a barrier to the development of discernment as a charism proper to all the baptized faithful. Consider the following papal quotation:

[Evangelical] discernment is accomplished through the sense of faith, which is a gift that the Spirit gives to all the faithful, and is therefore the work of the whole Church according to the diversity of the various gifts and charisms .... The Church, therefore, does not accomplish this discernment only through the Pastors ... but also through the laity: Christ 'made them His witnesses and gave them understanding of the faith and the grace of speech (cf. Acts 2: 17–18; Revelation 19: 10)' ....

You may be surprised to hear that this is a quotation, not from Pope Francis, but from Pope John Paul II.<sup>20</sup> The latter is known for his emphasis, especially in morals, on the teaching authority of the Magisterium. Yet Pope Francis inherits from his predecessor a theology of discernment as flowing from the baptismal gift of the Holy Spirit and therefore the work of the whole Church. I do not want to gloss over the real differences

<sup>18</sup> *Autobiography*, n. 8.

<sup>19</sup> GC 36, decree 1, n. 23.

<sup>20</sup> John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, n. 5.

between these two figures. Where John Paul II emphasizes the teaching Church, Francis accents the listening and learning Church; where John Paul underlines universally binding precepts of the natural law taught by the Magisterium, to which the consciences of the laity should remain faithful, Francis wants to give breathing space to individual consciences to discern where God is leading them here and now. Yet both agree in seeing discernment as a charism potentially universal to all Christians, and as a work of the Church as a whole.

There is need for a delicate balance here, therefore. While discernment is indeed a keynote of Ignatian spirituality, if we make of it something too exclusively Ignatian, we subvert our mission of fostering a culture of discernment in the Church as a whole. Not all are called to be Ignatian, yet all are called to discern.

It helps to recall that Ignatius is only one moment, albeit a significant moment, in the history of discernment.<sup>21</sup> Key figures in this history before Ignatius include Origen, Antony, Evagrius, Cassian, Benedict, Gregory, Bernard, Richard of St Victor, Jean Gerson, Bernadino, and Denys the Carthusian. After him come Mary Ward, Cardinal Bona, Scaramelli and, in the Reform tradition, Jonathan Edwards, who writes an entire treatise on discernment of spirits. This is not even to mention the Quakers, for whom a kind of discernment is the basis for their meetings and all their decision-making.

The Church's tradition of discernment, in all its breadth and depth from the desert monks to the Quakers, is both humbling and liberating. It is humbling because Jesuits and the Ignatian family realise they have sometimes been too quick to identify their own spirituality with discernment. It is liberating because discernment is not restricted to those specially versed in one school of spirituality but is the common patrimony of the Christian tradition, and this recognition underlines for the Ignatian family that they have a role in both fostering a culture of discernment in the Church and living it more fully in their own lives and ministries. Discernment is a work of the whole Church; discernment is for all.

**Nicholas Austin SJ** is a theological ethicist and Master of Campion Hall, Oxford. His research has focused on Thomas Aquinas and the virtues, and the connections between ethics and spirituality.

<sup>21</sup> For a survey of this history, see Mark A. McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge* (New York and Edinburgh: Independent Publishers' Group, 2004).

# ECOLOGY, EVOLUTIONARY ANTHROPOLOGY AND DISCERNMENT IN DEEP TIME

*Celia Deane-Drummond*

A CRITICAL PROBLEM facing the human community is how to address the immense challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss, mass poverty and environmental devastation. Scientific predictions are grim, and the ethical issues are not at all easy to grasp, given the complexity of the interlaced problems to be disentangled. I shall propose that an exploration of early human origins offers us important lessons about how to discern in challenging environmental situations where resolution seems impossible.

Scientists are discovering that far back in prehistory hominins (modern humans and their early ancestors) were extremely vulnerable to large-scale changes in climate and other survival challenges. I will suggest that entering this strange prehistoric world of the past can fire our imaginations about how to discern more effectively in relation to our collective futures. I will discuss collaborative research exploring the dawn of the capacity for practical wisdom: *phronesis*.

Discernment, in as much as it is about an affective form of listening to where the Holy Spirit is moving in an individual or in a community in order to make a right judgment leading to action, has some affinity with this virtue of practical wisdom. I will explore why wisdom thinking is of special relevance to the Church today, in the particular circumstances of the twenty-first century, given the background context of the work of Pope Francis on integral ecology. In this approach to wisdom thinking I have also found the medieval scholar Thomas Aquinas to be a helpful resource in the Christian tradition that can be brought to bear on these difficult

Aspects of this article have been published in Celia Deane-Drummond, 'Practical Wisdom in the Making: A Theological Approach to Early Hominin Evolution in Conversation with Modern Jewish Philosophy', in *The Evolution of Human Wisdom*, edited by Celia Deane-Drummond and Agustin Fuentes (Lanham: Lexington, 2017), 167–188.

questions. I will discuss some ways in which evolutionary anthropology and psychological research point to specific human capacities for memory, foresight and an emerging collective conscience, and how these capacities include a particular use of the imagination and memory that is also relevant to developing abilities in both individual and collective discernment.

### ***Pope Francis and Integral Ecology***

***Committed  
faith in a  
God who  
gives purpose  
to the cosmos***

As the first pope in the history of the Roman Catholic Church to choose the name Francis, Pope Francis is inviting us to join him in the emulation of St Francis of Assisi, combining special emphasis on the love of God, love for the created world and universal love extended to each and every human person. His mission includes the importance of valuing creation

as gift, peacemaking among those of different religions and none, and a special concern for the human dignity of those in extreme poverty who live and suffer in the most deprived areas of the world. His understanding of the Divine is grounded in a committed faith in a God who gives purpose to the cosmos as Creator and Redeemer of the world, as evidenced even in his first encyclical, *Lumen fidei* (The Light of Faith). This purpose in the universe is bound up with his belief in the purposefulness of the Trinity, manifest in the creation, in the incarnation of the divine in Jesus Christ, and in Jesus' death and resurrection.

Pope Francis deliberately encourages a more positive dialogue between science and religion. His own scientific training gives him confidence: there is more scientific information in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato si'* than in any previous papal encyclical. In facing the huge challenges of poverty and ecological destruction, he argues that science and religion are 'distinctive approaches to understanding reality', so that they can 'enter into an intense dialogue fruitful for both' (*Laudato si'*, n.62).

He also actively encourages those who are uncovering new scientific knowledge, for 'Human creativity cannot be suppressed' (*Laudato si'*, n.131). The light of faith is not 'extraneous to the material world', rather 'faith encourages the scientist to remain constantly open to reality in all its inexhaustible richness' (*Lumen fidei*, n.34); it can 'enrich the horizon of reason', as he claims in *Evangelii gaudium* (n.238). This, I believe, is particularly significant for the life of the Church. Surveys suggest that one of the main reasons why young people are becoming disaffected from the faith is because they consider it to be incompatible with science. I believe we can go a step further than pointing to conflict in the history of science,

which, in at least some cases, can be exposed as misinterpretation. We need to show positive interaction that is mutually enriching.

Building on the work of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, Pope Francis also attests to the compatibility of evolutionary theory with theology, in one of his first statements upon taking office as Pope in October 2014. At the same time, he holds fast to the Catholic tradition on human uniqueness, and recognises that there is a limit to scientific knowledge (*Laudato si'*, n. 199). He also is not afraid to caution his readers on the epistemological dangers inherent in various branches of science because 'each can tend to become enclosed in its own language' (*Laudato si'*, n. 201). A study by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania has shown a significant reduction in the perception of incompatibility between science and religion during Francis's papacy among the non-religious or less religiously conservative.<sup>1</sup> An editorial in *Nature* describes his attitude to science as one of 'respect and honest understanding'.<sup>2</sup>

In *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis's call for an integral ecology invites, among other things, a close collaboration between all areas of knowledge: be it in the sciences (ecology, climate science, biology, physics), social sciences (economics, politics, psychology, anthropology, development studies) or humanities (history, religious studies, philosophy and theology). All things are interrelated. I see this as a *wisdom* approach, healing the arrogance implicit in the fragmentation of different areas of knowledge, and inviting us to work together in partnership and collaboration. For Pope Francis 'no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out' (*Laudato si'*, n. 63).

His proposal for an integral ecology does not miss out the *human and social* dimensions of what is happening to our common home. This is perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of integral ecology, that 'there can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself' (n. 118). One step in this process is to recognise negative forms of anthropocentrism that focus on the human only at the expense of everything else. Instead, Pope Francis invites us to recognise that 'human beings are not completely autonomous' (n. 105). Integral ecology as a practice also means taking far more account of indigenous ways of

<sup>1</sup> This was an unpublished study sent to the author on 16 December 2016 by Dr Asheley Landrum.. For a related published work see Asheley Landrum and others, 'Processing the Papal Encyclical through Perceptual Filters: Pope Francis, Identity-protective Cognition, and Climate Change Concern', *Cognition*, 166 (2017), 1–12.

<sup>2</sup> 'Hope from the Pope', *Nature*, 522 (23 June 2015), 391.



thinking and being in the world. Indigenous people should be ‘principal dialogue partners’ (n. 146). We need to find alternative ways of considering what it means to be human. Our imaginations need, therefore, to be inspired by a different narrative of what human flourishing is all about.

### ***The First Humans***

I believe that one way to approach this, which is not necessarily all that self-evident, is to travel far back to the early dawn of human existence. The kinds of dramatic climate change events that we are currently experiencing, and will continue to experience on an ever-escalating scale, bear at least some resemblance to the extreme climatic challenges faced by humans early on in their evolution. The African continent, in particular, was affected by significant global, continental and regional climate change during key phases of hominin evolution.<sup>3</sup> Many anthropologists believe that such changes could have had an impact on that evolution, and some propose that climate change was critical to the Late Pliocene origin of the genus *Homo*.<sup>4</sup> Subdivision between species may have taken place because of the shrinking of different habitats arising from climate change.

Generally speaking, though, early human lineages were capable of adapting to a wide range of habitats.<sup>5</sup> Large-scale environmental variability favours those species that are generalists rather than specialists, in a shift from habitat-specific adaptations to more flexible ‘structures and behaviors responsive to complex environmental change’.<sup>6</sup> The types and forms of species that survive in extremely challenging environments are the most flexible ones; for specialist species the most likely result is extinction. And changes in climate were not the only important challenges for hominins: the immediate context for their evolution was the wider ecosystem. As hominins became bipedal and competed in the same ecological sphere with other carnivores, they became particularly vulnerable to large predators compared with other primates.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Naomi E. Levin, ‘Environment and Climate of Early Human Evolution’, *Annual Review of Earth and Planetary Science*, 43 (2015), 405–429.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth S. Vrba, ‘Late Pliocene Climatic Events and Hominin Evolution’, in *Evolutionary History of the Robust Australopithecines*, edited by Frederick E. Grine (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1988), 405–426.

<sup>5</sup> John David Kingston, ‘Shifting Adaptive Landscapes: Progress and Challenges in Reconstructing Early Hominin Evolution’, *Yearbook of Physical Anthropology*, 50 (2007), 20–58.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Potts, ‘Variability Selection in Hominin Evolution’, *Evolutionary Anthropology*, 7 (1998), 81–96, here 81.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey McKee, ‘Correlates and Catalysts of Hominin Evolution in Africa’, *Theory in Biosciences*, 136 (2018), 123–140, here 131.





© Erich Fedinand

*Reconstruction of a Neanderthal, Neanderthal Museum, Mettmann, Germany*

Jeffrey McKee argues that positive evolutionary variation can arise through novelties emerging in more stable environmental conditions as well as through external environmental stresses. The greatest changes in the fossil record of southern Africa occurred between two and one million years ago, in a period of relative climatic calm. McKee describes this process as *autocatalysis*, and it is an important supplement to Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection. He believes that 'the behavioural plasticity that accompanied brain evolution is what changes the adaptive milieu of early humans. The environment could be sought by foresight and, eventually, manipulated by tools.'<sup>8</sup> There are two possible theories here: did climate change trigger an expansion in brain size, or did brain expansion allow hominins to venture into new climate zones? Large brains compensated for characteristics that brought greater vulnerability, such as longer developmental childhood and obstetric problems with childbirth.

Terrence Deacon has suggested that *symbol-making* became the mark of what makes humans distinct.<sup>9</sup> This capacity could not have developed overnight. Glimpses of some sort of symbolic capability in the material

<sup>8</sup> McKee, 'Correlates and Catalysts', 133.

<sup>9</sup> Terrence Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: The Co-Evolution of Language and the Brain* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).

record imply a far deeper timescale, even if its fullest development came much later.<sup>10</sup> The ability to conduct long-range exchange of goods shows that, at least by the Pleistocene, humans had the ability to show foresight. But such specialist capacities first seem to come and then disappear at a range of geographical sites.<sup>11</sup> Was the development of advanced cognitive abilities, including practical and social intelligence, something sporadic?<sup>12</sup> Such a complex dynamic system includes cognitive, social and ecological components which interact with each other and with genetic factors in intricate feedback loops.<sup>13</sup>

### ***The Evolution of Wisdom***

The first form of wisdom that evolved in the human community was likely to have been practical wisdom, rather than the intellectual virtue, which would probably have demanded speech. Although complete practical wisdom involves deliberation, judgment and then action, might there have been, at least initially in early hominin evolution, non-linguistic forms of deliberation through other kinds of signalling? Or perhaps the different elements necessary for practical wisdom evolved separately? That is consistent with what is known about the evolution of complexity.

Practical wisdom, or *prudence*, according to Thomas Aquinas has eight components: *memoria* (memory), *intellectus* (understanding or intelligence), *docilitas* (docility or teachability), *solertia* (shrewdness), *ratio* (reason), *providentia* (foresight), *circumspectio* (circumspection) and *cautio* (caution) (2.2, q. 49).<sup>14</sup> *Memoria* is a memory that is 'true to being', which means that 'it contains in itself real things and events as they really are and were'.<sup>15</sup>

Having an accurate memory of prior experiences would be particularly important for early human survival in the Pleistocene, especially since recording memories in written form was not yet possible. *Docilitas* would

<sup>10</sup> Marc Kissel and Agustín Fuentes, 'From Hominid to Human: The Role of Human Wisdom and Distinctiveness in the Evolution of Modern Humans', *Philosophy, Theology and the Sciences*, 3/2 (2016), 217–244.

<sup>11</sup> Kissel and Fuentes, 'From Hominid to Human'; Marc Kissel and Agustín Fuentes, 'Semiosis in the Pleistocene', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 27/3 (2017), 397–412.

<sup>12</sup> Curtis W. Marean, 'An Evolutionary Anthropological Perspective on Modern Human Origins', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 44 (2015), 533–556, at 548.

<sup>13</sup> Agustín Fuentes, 'Integrative Anthropology and the Human Niche: Toward a Contemporary Approach to Human Evolution', *American Anthropologist*, 117 (2015), 302–315.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae, secunda secundae* 1–91, translated by Laurence Shapcote (Green Bay: Aquinas Institute, 2012) (references in the text).

<sup>15</sup> Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame P, 1966), 26.

be essential for passing skills from one person to the next. But it is also a reminder that complex decisions are never just about one individual's position, and would have been an important part of forming social communities. *Solertia*, which includes the ability to act clearly and well in the face of the unexpected, was likewise essential for early humans, who were still threatened by the presence of large predators. The ability to show *solertia* was a matter of survival.<sup>16</sup>

Insight and reasoned judgment are also vital: incorrect judgments could lead to fatal consequences. Foresight (*providentia*) is characteristically human in a way that *memoria* and *docilitas* are not, even though there are specifically human ways of remembering that are not possible for other animals. *Providentia* is linked to divine providence, so there is something of the character of the divine in us. Thomas also includes circumspection and caution in the list of the components of prudence that are concerned with putting knowledge into action. Circumspection is the ability to judge situations clearly and well, and to gather all the relevant information. A correctly informed caution gives good judgment about refraining from action where appropriate and recognising risks.

The judgments of practical wisdom are not fixed or certain in the ways that they would be if it were simply an application of rules or principles. Rather, as Thomas writes, 'since the matter of prudence is the contingent singulars about which are human actions, the certainty of prudence cannot be so great as to be devoid of all solicitude' (2.2, q.47, a.9). This is important since it shows that elements, at least, of practical wisdom could arise before any fixed rules or specific codes of conduct were developed. Yes, there must have been a sense of what constituted the good of the community, but rules for that community would not necessarily emerge immediately.

### ***Homo Prospectus?***

The psychologist Martin Seligman argues that 'we are misnamed': *Homo sapiens* should not be called wise at all—for the simple reason that none of us really is wise and wisdom remains an aspiration only. What truly describes modern humans, by contrast with other social animals, is 'the

<sup>16</sup> See Donna Hart and Robert W. Sussman, *Man the Hunted: Primates, Predators, and Human Evolution*, 2nd edn (Boulder: Westview, 2009); Robert W. Sussman, 'Why the Legend of the Killer Ape Never Dies: The Enduring Power of Cultural Beliefs to Distort Our View of Human Evolution', in *War, Peace, and Human Nature: The Convergence of Evolutionary and Cultural Views*, edited by Douglas Fry (New York: Oxford UP, 2013), 97–111.

unrivalled human ability to be guided by imagining alternatives stretching into the future—"prospection".<sup>17</sup> The prospective and socially intelligent characteristics of human beings are integral to practical wisdom.

Of all the elements of practical wisdom, prospection or foresight is, it seems to me, one of the most interesting to consider in the context of climate change and its ecological consequences. Anticipation is a characteristic of social animals; what is much more difficult is the ability to plan ahead with a good chance of successful prediction in order to regulate present behaviour; for that, humans need 'a very expensive brain and a very long apprenticeship in life'.<sup>18</sup> Human distinctiveness includes a specific ability *to look ahead and imagine the future in realistic and profound ways*. The capacity that this gives to judge appropriately between good ends would have been critical for the survival of early humans, and it remains critical to our survival now.

Thomas believed that foresight was the most significant, and indeed the dominant, part of practical wisdom, since without it good judgments of prudence were impossible. Even the Latin *prudens* comes from the words for 'one who sees from afar', *porro videns* (2.2, q.49, a.6); and for Thomas, who believed that prudence is a cognitive rather than an affective power, 'a prudent man's sight is keen, and he foresees the event of uncertainties' (2.2, q.47, a.1).<sup>19</sup> Foresight, which Thomas also called *human providence*, is strictly, in practical matters, about the future, rather than the present or past. For the past and present involve a kind of common-sense necessity or inevitability, since past events cannot be undone, so 'consequently future contingents, insofar as they can be directed by man to the end of human life, are matters of prudence' (2.2, q.49, a.6).

The combination of contingency and purposefulness is what practical wisdom is all about. Thomas concludes, therefore, that among the different parts of prudence, there is one that is 'the principle of all the parts of prudence' and 'is necessary precisely that some particular thing may be rightly directed to its end' (2.2, q.49, a.6). That one component is *foresight*. Foresight is practical rather than purely theoretical, so it is less about universal truths than about the ability to make effective practical decisions where there are alternative possibilities.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Seligman, 'Preface', in *Homo Prospectus*, edited by Martin Seligman and others (Oxford: OUP, 2016), ix.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Railton, 'Introduction', in *Homo Prospectus*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Aquinas is quoting Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, chapter 10.

### **Human Providence and Divine Providence**

Despite the pre-eminence of foresight, Thomas Aquinas, in common with contemporary psychology, also recognises the importance of learning and memory as providing the background into which decisions about the future are made. He identified *understanding* as a critical component of practical wisdom, in a way that seems close to the idea of intuition in psychology. For him, understanding is integral to having knowledge. Knowledge of the past is related to memory, while knowledge of the present—either certain or contingent—involves understanding and intelligence (2.2, q.48). This intelligence/understanding is placed in a different category from reasoned judgment.<sup>20</sup>

The role of understanding in prudence seems to be, for Thomas at least, ‘the right estimate about some final principle’ (2.2, q.49, a.2). The principle is a general one that is valid in practice, such as *do no evil*; understanding concerns the way in which the principle is expressed practically in concrete situations. Thomas places understanding before the slower task of deliberative reasoning. So:

The certitude of reason comes from the intellect. Yet the need of reason is from a defect in the intellect, since those things in which the intellective power is in full vigor have no need for reason, for they comprehend the truth by their simple insight, as do God and the angels. (2.2, q.49, a.5)

If this is so, theoretically at least, it could have been possible for early hominins to arrive at judgments of prudence by intuitive intelligence without necessarily using a more complex deliberative form of reasoning. The psychologist Peter Railton notes: ‘the rapidity of intuitive responses need not mean that they do not involve complex processing of information or calculation of expected value and risk’.<sup>21</sup>

A crucial distinction between Thomas and the contemporary discussion as laid out by Seligman, Railton and their colleagues, however, is that for Thomas, following Augustine, ‘prudence is love discerning aright that which helps from that which hinders us in tending to God’ (2.2, q.47, a.1). He emphasizes the importance of the theological virtue of charity, which has a close relationship with practical wisdom. So, ‘the first act of the appetitive faculty is love, as stated above. Accordingly, prudence

<sup>20</sup> See 2.2, q.49, a.2 for understanding/intelligence and 2.2, q.49, a.5 for reasoned judgment.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Railton, ‘Intuitive Guidance’, in *Homo Prospectus*, 73.



© orientazing @ Flickr

*Göbekli Tepe in Turkey, the world's oldest known religious site, 9000 BC*

is said to be love, not indeed essentially, but insofar as love moves to the act of prudence.' (2.2, q.47, a.1). This also relates to the Ignatian tradition of the practice of discernment, which is always orientated towards God.

In terms of evolution, prudence as striving towards God presupposes the emergence of some awareness of God in early human consciousness. Just as it is almost impossible to track accurately subtle changes in human mental states, so the appearance of religious awareness is equally elusive. Nonetheless, it is possible to speculate that the ability to look into the future could have been *fostered* by religious experience or could have arisen as a prelude to religious consciousness—or some combination of both could have taken place in a positive feedback loop.

Practical wisdom is situated between intellectual and moral virtues rather like a compass: it attunes the prospecting mind to good ends as under the general direction of divine providence. This need not be rigid or deterministic, since divine providence still protects contingency for those things that are intended to be contingent.

It pertains to divine providence to produce every grade of being. And thus it has prepared for some things necessary causes, so that they happen of necessity; for others contingent causes, that they may happen by contingency, according to the nature of their proximate causes. (1, q.22, a.4)<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae, prima pars*, 1–49, translated by Laurence Shapcote, edited by John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón (Lander: Aquinas Institute, 2012).

### Memoria and Practical Wisdom

For Seligman, the designation of *Homo prospectus* amounts to a new turn in psychological research that has, in the past, dwelt on an image of human agency as locked into its past history. However, I believe that we should not forget the crucial capacity for memory. In the middle ages practical wisdom was represented with three eyes, looking to the past, present and future.<sup>23</sup>

Thomas Aquinas places *memoria* first among the components of prudence, and for good reason, since without *memoria* prudential reasoning would be impossible. There are four aspects of memory that he highlights (2.2, q.49, a.1):

1. associating memories with unusual images in order to help with retention;
2. ordering of information;
3. being earnest: we are more likely to remember if we take the trouble to keep the memory of images imprinted on the mind;
4. reflecting frequently on the things that we want to remember: this helps them to stay in the memory, so customs become second nature.

Memory accordingly requires diligent practice, but it can also come to our minds through the work of grace. ‘When we reflect on a thing frequently, we quickly call it to mind, though passing from one thing to another by a kind of natural order.’ (2.2, q.49, a.1) Memory is the precondition that makes practical wisdom possible (1.2, q.56, a.5).<sup>24</sup>

Human memory is distinctive compared with that of other animals:

As to the memorative power, man has not only memory, as other animals have in the sudden recollection of the past; but also reminiscence by syllogistically, as it were, seeking for a recollection of the past by the application of individual intentions (1, q.78, a.4).<sup>25</sup>

This search forms a parallel to the imaginative searching out of different possibilities in foresight. In the context of human evolutionary history

<sup>23</sup> Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), 193.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae, prima Secundae, 1–70*, translated by Laurence Shapcote, edited by John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón (Lander: Aquinas Institute, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae, prima pars, 50–119*, translated by Laurence Shapcote, edited by John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón (Lander: Aquinas Institute, 2012).



it seems quite likely that vivid images started to be retained in the memory as a first step towards the development of foresight. Things and striking visceral images are much more memorable than words, so the ability to recollect in this way does not have to be reliant on explicit linguistic tools.

### **Pictorial Humanity**

Hans Jonas's book *The Phenomenon of Life* sheds further light on the potential importance of a distinctly human memory. Jonas begins with the human imagination in its perceptive ability to distinguish between observing an object and the creation of an image of that object, in what he calls 'pictorial man'.<sup>26</sup> As Jonas is well aware, image creation is not the same as straightforward *imitation*, which would be the creation of a copy, but rather involves a deliberate artistic *choice* of which aspects of an object to emphasize. While in memory it may be hard to control the things we recollect, this is not the case for foresight.

Jonas recognises that this capability is distinctive, but sees it as having no immediate usefulness: 'an image-making creature, therefore, is one that indulges in the making of useless objects, or has ends in addition to the biological ones, or can serve the latter in ways remote from the direct usefulness of the instrumental things'.<sup>27</sup> This is a new relationship with objects from the purely instrumental. But is its seeming uselessness a correct interpretation? If image-making is integral to memory and foresight, then it becomes an important, arguably essential, ingredient of the capacity for wisdom.

The first requirement in making an image is the 'ability to perceive likeness', and perceive it in a certain way. A bird, on seeing a scarecrow, is either deceived or not, but does not register any intermediate state. 'When the deception breaks down, only straw, sticks and rags remain. For the animal similitude does not exist.' A prerequisite of the human ability to see likeness is to step back from the environment and distinguish appearance from reality. It is 'in the internal exercise of imagination, by which, to the best of our knowledge, human memory is distinguished from animal recollection'.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Hans Jonas, 'Image Making and the Freedom of Man', in *The Phenomenon of Life* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1966), 157–175.

<sup>27</sup> Jonas, 'Image Making and the Freedom of Man', 158.

<sup>28</sup> Jonas, 'Image Making and the Freedom of Man', 166, 170.



For Jonas the elemental power of the imagination is primary:

Imagination separates the remembered *eidōs* from the occurrence of individual encounter with it, freeing its possession from the accidents of space and time. The freedom so gained—to ponder things in imagination—is one of distance and control at once.<sup>29</sup>

Memories so created may then be shared and become common property. Crucially ‘the remaker of things is potentially also the maker of new things, and the one power is not different from the other’.<sup>30</sup> For Jonas this transition to creating likeness is sufficient for the category of the human, and amounts to a ‘metaphysical gap’. It gives some insight into how *memoria* might develop into prudential reasoning.

### ***Memories of Another World***

In the critical ecological and social context of the early twenty-first century, a re-annealing of different forms of knowledge needs to be a significant part of what it means to develop integral ecology. Early evolutionary anthropology does not just tell us about human origins, but also points to different ways of considering the meaning of human discernment. The capacity for foresight as an essential characteristic of practical wisdom is one of the most striking and originary features of human communities.

Practical wisdom involves a combination of the intuitive imagination with the ability to recollect past events, to reason and to predict future outcomes accurately. It arises in *collective* and not just individual contexts. There would be little advantage for human communities if a single individual had foresight, or even keen patterns of remembering, but these could not be shared.<sup>31</sup> Technological practices that indicate image-making and symbolic meaning go back very deep into human evolutionary history.<sup>32</sup> Such iconic and symbolic social practices would have provided the basis for imaginative and shared memories, in a positive feedback loop. And as human communities searched for a transcendent Other, an experience of that Other gradually dawned, filling out memories and eventually providing foresight with a sense of divine providence.

<sup>29</sup> Jonas, ‘Image Making and the Freedom of Man’, 170

<sup>30</sup> Jonas, ‘Image Making and the Freedom of Man’, 172.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Morality* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP, 2016), 141. Tomasello argues that interdependence is primary and that this is followed by cognitive adaptations in the form of shared intentionality (152–153).

<sup>32</sup> See Kissel and Fuentes, ‘From Hominid to Human’.



*Fossilised hominin footprints, Lake Natron, Tanzania*

In retrospect it is possible to interpret the yearnings of the very earliest humans theologically as a slow reaching out towards the transcendent, the inklings of which were in place long before our own identified species, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, first walked on the savannah hundreds of thousands of years ago. Tracing our memories back to this other world can inspire us in a number of different respects:

1. Engagement between theology and science is positive, not just in the instrumental task of drawing in religious groups so as to tackle the critical ecological and human challenges of the twenty-first century, but as being illuminating for theology and generating richer scientific knowledge.
2. We see clearly how very early on in human history we managed to survive and make good decisions even when facing enormous climatic and other threats.
3. The lives of early hominins were densely entangled with each other and with other species in interconnected communities. In the modern world we have largely lost that sense of rich embeddedness.
4. The development of *foresight* is characteristic of the *Homo* lineage; it begins to make us more like God even while not necessarily knowing who God is, and is a critical aspect of practical wisdom.

5. At the same time a rich capacity for pictorial memory helps us to generate a positive vision. (Ignatius relies on the development of that capacity in his Spiritual Exercises.)
6. Fully developed practical wisdom includes spontaneously generated insight, but also deliberative reasoning. Ignatius insisted that discernment was not irrational but included both affective and intellectual capacities acting in concert.
7. Our ability to imagine unseen worlds is an important prelude to religious experience.
8. The capacities for foresight and memory go hand in hand: both are aspects of practical wisdom.
9. The tools of foresight and memory, and other aspects of practical wisdom such as insight and circumspection, will be critical in making difficult decisions about our futures and the future of planet Earth.
10. The discerning Church, in order to exercise its capacity for discernment, needs to take a leading role in fostering practical wisdom in concert with the virtues of charity.
11. While Ignatius of Loyola developed a detailed account of the discernment of different spirits in order to help individuals and communities know how to act aright in relation to God, we can also see how that discernment is grounded in rich relationships with each other and the natural world.
12. Our capacity to discern the movement of the Holy Spirit in a life of prayer is necessarily building on, and even transforming, our natural receptivity and the powers of our imagination, insight and reason, all of which are integral to practical wisdom and have their origins in our deep history.

*Celia Deane-Drummond* is a senior research fellow in theology and director of the *Laudato si'* Research Institute at Campion Hall, Oxford. Her research to date has focused on the interface between theology and science, particularly systematic and moral theology informed by contemporary and historical Catholic sources.

Spiritual companions connect here.



Seek and Find Guide

Conferences

Workshops

Webinars

Author Readings

Seminars

Open Houses

Presence Journal

Digital Magazines

Newsletters

Videos

Forums

Plug in to [sdiworld.org](http://sdiworld.org)



Open to all who are spiritual

# UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD WITH ST AUGUSTINE

*Edward Howells*

‘GOD IS CLOSER TO ME than I am to myself.’ These words of Augustine—literally, God is more inward to me than my innermost part or self—offer some guidance on where to look for God, maybe even how to experience God.<sup>1</sup> They have become a classic expression of God’s presence according to Augustine, and are frequently quoted. I would like to examine briefly here what they mean, and how, if at all, they might help in understanding the experience of God.

The words come first in negative terms in *Confessions*, book 3, as part of Augustine’s judgment on his wayward youth. God was present with him, as the ‘life of my soul’, but he sought God in the things of creation. He tried to find God in those things rather than finding God’s authentic presence with him inwardly. The same sentiment appears in the more famous passage of book 10, which begins ‘late have I loved you’: ‘you were within and I was in the external world ... you were with me, and I was not with you’ (*Confessions*, 10.27.38). But he says little about what this interior place is. It is negatively construed as the place where he failed to look, turning instead to the familiar world of ‘outward’ things. We know that God is hidden here, and found in a way that is different from how God might be seen in the outside world—for instance by inference from the order or beauty in creation; but what this means positively is less clear.

The expression ‘more inward’ lends a clue, however. Inwardness is an orientation or trajectory of investigation. If I could turn inwards and grasp my own intimacy with myself, Augustine is suggesting, and then go further in that direction, I would end up in the presence of God. If I

<sup>1</sup> St Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: OUP, 1992), 3.6.11 (subsequent references to this and other works by Augustine in the text).

could look in that direction beyond even the 'innermost' point in myself, I would be looking at God. God, as creator, is my source, so if I can move towards the source of myself, I must be moving towards God. But what exactly does this mean?

### **God and Consciousness**

In *The Trinity*, Augustine's longest speculative work, written after the *Confessions*, he spends over half the book exploring this point.<sup>2</sup> He begins by offering an interpretation of the verse from Genesis, 'let us make humanity according to our image and likeness' (Genesis 1:26; Vulgate), saying that we possess the image of God as Trinity in our created minds. This gives us an 'inward' capacity to know and experience God. It is a capacity not just to experience God by remote inference from the things of creation, but immediately, as Jesus experiences God in his flesh, with the directness and intimacy of the divine Son with the Father.

We are not the same as the divine Son, of course, being creatures and we are not naturally divine like Jesus Christ, but we have an image or imprint of the Trinity in the mind which can be said to be our greatest 'likeness' to God (*Trinity*, 7.12), permitting us to participate in the kind of intimate knowledge and experience that Jesus, as the Son, has of God. Following the ancients, Augustine thinks of this highest capacity of the mind as self-awareness, namely, that we can not only think things, but think about our thought while thinking them. Since Genesis 1 distinguishes between the creation of animals and human beings on the sixth day, Augustine understands the difference according to this capacity of consciousness. In relation to God, it entails that while, as creatures, we relate first to created things in the world, we also have the capacity to be aware of God at the same time, just as we can be aware of ourselves when we think.

*The Trinity* is complicated by the fact that Augustine seeks to use this idea to identify models in the internal workings of consciousness for the doctrinal problem of how three can also be one in the Trinity. If the capacity for consciousness is where our greatest likeness to God resides, he reasons, there must be something in consciousness that resembles the Trinity, which gives us an inward image or representation of the Trinity to aid our understanding of the doctrine. He comes up with the idea

<sup>2</sup> St Augustine, *The Trinity*, translated by Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1991).



that memory, intellect and will, as both distinct and united in the operations of the mind, can provide a suitable model. This becomes very involved, in over a hundred pages of close argument, which I do not propose to elaborate here. But his treatment of the idea of inwardness, or consciousness, is worth exploring further to help answer our question.

The central point that connects human consciousness with God as Trinity, according to Augustine, is that both are very direct kinds of personal relationship. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one substance, yet three by virtue of their relations. With God, to be



Trifacial Trinity, Cuzco school, Peru, 1750–1770

God is to be relationship: there is no difference (*Trinity*, 5.6). This relationship is so direct that there is no difference of substance between the partners—only the relations themselves.

At this point we might be inclined to abandon any hope of finding a connection with the human situation, since relations between humans are not like this. When we think of two people who are friends, for instance, we begin with a picture of two people, then think of their relationship. We can speak of their ‘friendship’, which refers only to their relationship, but this is always an abstraction from their twoness as separate people, not something that can exist on its own (*Trinity*, 9.5). In contrast, God exists as pure relations, without first being three separate beings, or being divisible into three things.

And yet, there is an exception to this rule in just one place, Augustine suggests, which is in the basic capacity of human consciousness for self-awareness. To be aware of oneself is to possess a relationship with oneself, in which one knows oneself through the relationship, without dividing oneself in two separate things (*Trinity*, 9.6). The object of the awareness and the subject of the awareness are distinct, yet both are

also one in consciousness. One does not know oneself as separate from oneself, yet one does know oneself: the relationship is oneself, rather than subsequent to oneself (*Trinity*, 14.8).

There is, then, a powerful likeness to the Trinity in consciousness. Here we have the capacity to know something without distancing it from us. We can know the relationship and distinguish it into two parts simultaneously. This indicates that it is possible to know God and to know ourselves as distinct from God in the same way, without departing from the relationship itself. We can know ourselves and God within this pure relationship, in which there is no bodily separation of persons.

Augustine derives a great deal from this point. We cannot anticipate what our actual experience of God will be before it happens, but we can now say something about the *kind* of experience that it will be, based on this inward capacity of consciousness (*Trinity*, 14.15). Augustine is making a more ambitious point than he could by merely recounting his own experience of God and how it develops. He did that in the *Confessions*; in *The Trinity*, he is claiming to have identified a central feature of all experience of God, true of every case. When you experience God, you will experience something known primarily as personal relationship, not by first seeing God as separate from yourself. You find yourself as distinct from God in this relationship: in this kind of knowing, self-knowledge and knowledge of God are given together. It is 'inward' in this respect, and unlike the way that you know outward things.

### ***An Incorporeal God***

In the background to this is the philosophical problem that God is not a thing. God does not have a being extended in space and time, but is the one 'in whom we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:27), as Augustine frequently reminds us in *The Trinity*. If we are thinking of God in terms of bodily separation, or as any kind of body, we are not thinking of God. Even Jesus' human body, which can be thought in that way, is not God, but the instrument of his divine person. We can have a relationship with Jesus' body in which we see God, but the body itself, as separate from that relationship, is not God. The capacity of the mind to know by pure relationship allows us to avoid the idolatry of reducing God to a body. It is our spiritual capacity to see God as God is and not merely as a thing in creation.

To discover this is a vital element in spiritual development for Augustine. As a young man, he could not find God because he thought



of God as a creature, expecting to find something that he could know like a thing in creation. As he says of this period:

I thought simply non-existent anything not extended in space .... My eyes are accustomed to such images. My heart accepted the same structure .... I conceived even you, life of my life, as a large being, permeating infinite space on every side .... But it was false. For on that hypothesis ... more of you would be contained by an elephant's body than a sparrow's to the degree that it is larger and occupies more space. (*Confessions*, 7.1.2)

Augustine sought God as an enlarged version of a creature, based on his familiarity with the things of creation ('my eyes were accustomed to such images'). This is God as the old man in the sky. The problem is that, as creator, God is not a created thing, so cannot be like this. God is not extended in space—unless we want to say that there is more of God in an elephant than a sparrow! Rather, our task is to think of one *in* whom we have our existence, as the 'life of my life'. That requires us not just to think of something different—bigger, better—but a transformation of how we know at all.

The inward capacity to know by pure relationship is our means to this transformed way of knowing. Augustine points out that it is a thoroughly ordinary capacity. The reason that we do not see it is that it is implicit: we do not advert to it. Its presence can be recognised, though, when we think about quite ordinary things that we know, such as how we know things as good, true, just, beautiful and so on. These Platonic terms for spiritual perfections, which Augustine allies with God, are not known by separating a bodily object from us, but require the capacity to know by pure relationship. He says of knowing goodness, for instance: 'You can perceive good itself by participating in [that by] which these other things are good—and you understand it together with them when you hear a good this or that' (*Trinity*, 8.5).

Good is known by participation. You understand it when you see it as something held in common between things that are called good, by seeing it 'together with' them. It is known as that which all these things participate in together, rather than as a thing that can be separated out as belonging to only one of them. Our capacity for knowing by pure relationship is implicated here. We are able to see what good things have in common as their participated reality, quite apart from seeing them as separate things. The same is true of God. We know God by participation, by sharing in what God is in relation to all created things; and we know this using our

inward capacity for self-awareness. That is, we know it by pure relationship, not by first distinguishing God and ourselves as two separate things.

### ***Know Thyself***

To bring the capacity to explicit awareness, however, we need to think about that capacity in consciousness itself. Augustine uses the command of the Delphic Oracle, 'Know thyself', to help in his articulation of this self-awareness. He says:

It is not like a man being told 'Look at your face', which he can only do in a mirror; even our own face is absent from our sight, because it is not in a place our sight can be directed at. But when the mind is told *Know thyself*, it knows itself the very moment it understands what 'thyself' is, and for no other reason than that it is present to itself. (*Trinity*, 10.12)

To see your face in a mirror is to get an outward picture of yourself, even though it is a close likeness. A mirror works by creating some distance between your face and your eyes, so that you can get a look at



A Philosopher Holding a Mirror, by Jusepe de Ribera, c. 1630

your face. This is one model of self-knowledge. It is what is commonly meant when people are asked to appraise themselves, say, in terms of strengths and weaknesses. But it is an outward assessment, done in a manner no different from assessing someone else's strengths and weaknesses, and it is not the kind of knowing that we are seeking here. In contrast, Augustine says, the closest kind of self-knowledge is when I know myself 'for no other reason than that' I am 'present to' myself.

This is best understood by trying it out as a mental exercise. Think first of the kind of knowledge that you have by looking at yourself

from outside, as another person in the room might see you. You are sitting in your chair, or wherever you are, reading these words. Now turn inwards: think about how you know yourself from your own perspective. You are the one reading these words, but where is the 'you' in this activity? You cannot look *at* yourself as separate from the reading, by holding up a mirror. But you can catch a glimpse of yourself on the move, as the subject doing the reading. This is a presence quite different from your knowledge of yourself from the outside. It is an intimate self-awareness so close that you cannot separate your 'you' from it. You can only find the you *within* the activity itself—in sheer self-presence.

### ***The God of Love***

A Platonist would agree with the connection that Augustine makes here between self-knowledge and knowledge of God. But something further, and distinctively Christian, emerges in Augustine's account, made clear by his discussion of the scriptural text, 'God is love' (1 John 4:8). The capacity to know by pure relationship indicates not just that we can know ourselves, but that we are made to know God as love, in a personal relationship of love, known from the inside.

The fundamental declaration of the Trinity is that the Father 'sends' the Son and the Holy Spirit. For us to know this sending requires that we have the capacity to know it not as an additional fact about God, separate from what God is, but as the pure relations of Father, Son and Holy Spirit that simply are God (*Trinity*, 4.26–29). Platonic inwardness teaches us how to find our own source in God, but to know the trinitarian nature of God is, further, to know God's mission to us, and to know it from the inside in the same way, by participation. Consciousness provides us with the capacity to know God's love from the inside, as intimate participants.

To know God in this way is to know God's love from the inside in the same manner that we know ourselves. It also means, as Augustine continues his exposition of 1 John 4, that when we love our neighbour, we can find God in the same love. He says,

Let him [anyone] love his brother, and love that love; after all, he knows the love he loves with better than the brother he loves. There now, he can already have God better known to him than his brother, certainly better known because more present, better known because more inward to him, better known because more sure. (*Trinity*, 8.12)

We do not have to choose between love of neighbour and love of God. When we love our neighbour, God can be known as distinct from the self purely at the level of the love, without making God into a separate (outward) third person in the relationship. God is known as 'inward' to the love with which we love our neighbour, through the internal differentiation of the relationship itself. God is then 'better known' and 'more sure' than knowledge of the neighbour, since God is known as inward to the love, while the neighbour must also be known outwardly.

This completes Augustine's view of how we know God by inwardness: our capacity for consciousness gives us the ability to know God and ourselves at the same time, from within the relationship of love that God sends to us as Trinity. It remains to draw out some implications for experience of God.

### ***Experiencing God***

The first implication is that it is possible to experience God distinctly and directly, yet also simultaneously with experience of the world. It is possible to differentiate God's love of the world so that I can see myself in it, according to the differentiation of self and God at the level of pure relationship that we have seen. Augustine takes the view that I have the capacity to do this as a basic fact of human consciousness. This perhaps goes some way towards explaining how to achieve Ignatius of Loyola's notion of seeing God in all things (Exx 235). Every human is profoundly designed for this possibility, in consciousness.

The question follows as to why such knowledge is in fact so hard to achieve. Augustine's answer, in short, is that we are hampered by sin. Sin does not remove the capacity to see God, but it works to turn attention away from God, which curtails the capacity. It sets up a competition between inward and outward kinds of knowing—between knowledge of self and God and knowledge of the world—where no competition was intended. We see this in the way that manipulative rationality, which is an outward way of knowing, comes to dominate other kinds of knowing. Inward knowing, which works by participation and sharing among equals, is pushed aside and rendered insignificant (*Trinity*, 12.14–15). This preference for the kind of knowledge in which we can control and manipulate what we know, rather than be receptive to and participate in something greater than ourselves, is the mark of pride, which is the root of sin, according to Augustine. It obscures the inward capacity for personal experience of God.

A second implication is that in this experience of God, knowledge of God and knowledge of self can be equally joined with love of others. It is often supposed to be a weakness of Augustine's introspective emphasis that it takes away from love of neighbour. But his point is the opposite. In the inward way of knowing, we can know our self-presence *at the same time as* loving our neighbour, because we are knowing a love in which all loves participate. In this participated knowing, there is no competition between love of self and love of others. If there were, it would be an outward knowing, not an inward, participated one. To introspect according to this inwardness only makes us more aware of what we share with others, and so too of our dependence on others. The turn to the neighbour is actually advanced by discovering our mutual participation in God, in inwardness.

**We are  
knowing a  
love in which  
all loves  
participate**

Third, experience of God transforms the individual into a more relational creature. The capacity for consciousness, as we have seen, puts relationship before individuation. The self is known by means of this relational capacity in consciousness, and not vice versa. To know oneself as an autonomous individual is then also revealed as secondary to this relationality; and as this awareness increases in relation to the love of God, so our understanding of ourselves as relational increases. To reiterate Augustine's argument, if the Trinity is pure relations, to know God as Trinity requires a relational capacity for knowing, to which everything else that we understand about the self is secondary. When we act out of our awareness of the participation of this relational capacity in the love of God, our love of others grows.

Fourth, experience of God, in spite of Augustine's highly intellectual argument, is not a merely intellectual matter. After all that has been said, it might seem to rest on high cognitive function—certainly if understanding *The Trinity* is the test! But, though he likes to reason carefully and at length, Augustine is pointing to a capacity that is there in all human beings regardless of how well they score in exams. We can suppose that this capacity is present even in those who, for reasons of immaturity or disability, have no skill in articulating their self-knowledge. We are not dealing with articulating self-knowledge (that is, the outward articulation of what is inward), but with the roots of that self-knowledge in consciousness, as sheer self-presence. At this level, it exists in every deliberate human act. Even a squeeze of the hand by the smallest baby, or by a profoundly intellectually disabled person, for instance, indicates this self-presence. It does not require any complicated reflective ability

to know it, and this same capacity alone, apart from any other kind of cognitive performance, makes possible the experience of God.

Finally, experience of God has a desirous character, arising from its relational nature. Since it is experience known as fundamentally shared, it always seeks to know more of the other and of its life with the other in the relationship. This also shows its character as love, in which knowledge of self alone is not enough—the partner through which the self is known is also sought. To know oneself is, finally, to know that one needs God to know oneself. ‘Seeing love’ is Augustine’s shorthand for this expanding movement of consciousness into the relationship of love (for example *Trinity*, 8.10). It constantly seeks to exceed what is already known. To experience in this way must, therefore, have a gift character, in seeking what is received from the other in the love, as well as a strong element of excess, in an ecstatic movement beyond the self. There is always more to receive, further to go, and an awareness of not yet knowing all that there is to know (*Trinity*, 15).

*Edward Howells* is a senior lecturer in theology and religious studies at the University of Roehampton, before which he taught at Heythrop College, University of London. He writes on Christian spirituality and mystical theology (especially medieval).

# DECISION OR DISCERNMENT?

## Spiritual Tools in Education

*Adrian Porter*

IN OCTOBER 2017, for the first time in the history of the Society of Jesus, representatives of every Jesuit school in the world came together at a single conference, held in Rio de Janeiro. Delegates from 83 Jesuit Provinces represented around 2,500 schools and just over two million pupils. At that conference the Superior General of the Society, Arturo Sosa, talked about the mission of Jesuit education and the challenges that it faces. Jesuit schools remain an extraordinary worldwide network, the most extensive single, coherent education system outside China. Jesuit education is a highly influential tradition, but it is necessary to go deeper into that tradition, to think in terms of the *magis*. We need to do better—not that we are doing badly now, but we should be constantly seeking for the common good and the greater glory of God.

Father General presented the conference with six very specific challenges. First of all, he wanted to see Jesuit schools innovate in their teaching methods: ‘it is important for our institutions to be spaces for educational investigation, true laboratories in innovation in teaching’.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, he looked for continued progress in education for justice as a particular hallmark of Jesuit schools. Taking on the agenda of Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato si’*, he made concern for the environment a priority. He emphasized the importance of safeguarding, about which we should never fall into complacency. He called for a strong experience of the Christian faith, and in particular of Ignatian spirituality, in Jesuit schools. Finally he urged us to think and act both locally and globally, with the worldwide perspective that our worldwide network gives us.

<sup>1</sup> Arturo Sosa, ‘Jesuit Education: Forming Human Beings Reconciled with Their Fellows, with Creation and with God’, 20 October 2017, n.49, in *Fr General at the International Congress for Jesuit Education Delegates*, available at [http://www.sjweb.info/documents/assj/2017.10.19\\_SOSA\\_JESEDU-Rio2017\\_F\\_EN.pdf](http://www.sjweb.info/documents/assj/2017.10.19_SOSA_JESEDU-Rio2017_F_EN.pdf), accessed 17 September 2019.



I should like to look in more detail at just one of these challenges here: how to foster the experience of the Christian faith, the experience of God, in schools. The General made some specific proposals which were also taken up in the resolutions of the conference, the first of which was a commitment to introducing the Ignatian Examen into our schools in order 'to help students listen to their inner voice and learn the path of interiority'.<sup>2</sup> From September 2019 the Examen will be done every day with every student and every member of staff in the eleven schools run by the British Province, as well as in our school in Denmark. This will be built into the way we operate; it has already been happening in some schools for a while, but a lot of preparation and formation is still being done in thinking about how to do the Examen in a school setting.

While always recognising the importance of interreligious education, in our own schools we need to make use of our own tradition of Ignatian spirituality, and in particular the practice of discernment, something that has also been taken up in the Universal Apostolic Preferences of the Society.<sup>3</sup> The last Jesuit General Congregation said that we needed to return to our roots: first to a discerning community, then to a life in faith and finally to the mission that flows from both.<sup>4</sup>

When I was reading this it occurred to me that, in our schools anyway and I suspect in most active apostolates, we are doing things in the reverse order. What dominates is the mission; then we look at the life of faith, which is sometimes no more than an added extra, and only then do we go back to discernment. We have actually got these things the wrong way round. I think of this particularly when I talk to head teachers about discernment. There is so much going on in school leadership at so many different levels, and heads need to make quick decisions which may involve very large sums of money, or people's lives and the way families work, or the institution of the school itself. We encourage them to use discernment in these situations. For their part, heads tend to see discernment as a way of getting through the intricacies of the different negotiations they have to undertake: of doing things well and in an Ignatian way.

<sup>2</sup> Delegates to the International Congress for Jesuit Education, 'Action Statement', in *Fr General at the International Congress for Jesuit Education Delegates*, 37.

<sup>3</sup> See Arturo Sosa, 'Universal Apostolic Preferences of the Society of Jesus, 2019–2029', available at <https://jesuits.global/en/documents/send/8-uap-docs/63-universal-apostolic-preferences>.

<sup>4</sup> GC 36, decree 1, n. 6.

But there is a danger here, highlighted by the Superior General, of ‘a false type of discernment in common, which only seeks to clothe in correct Ignatian language decisions that were already made on the basis of the criteria of one’s own group’.<sup>5</sup> I have seen an example of this in the minutes of the governing body of one of our schools: every time a decision was made they said ‘we discerned this’, or ‘we discerned that’, but they had not discerned at all; they were doing exactly what the General warned against. We need to introduce schools to the idea of what discernment really is and how to practise it in a busy practical context.

What I hope to do here is to share some of the ideas and materials that we have been developing recently in schools in Britain and across Europe, and our responses to the sorts of issues that have been arising, before looking again at the process of discernment in common and how best to approach it in a school environment. If we are to encourage communities such as schools, parishes and charities to use the Ignatian tool of discernment, we need not only to provide formation in the art of discernment but also a sense of what merits discernment and what is simply a decision. Efficient decision-making is crucial for effective organizations, especially in times of crisis or extreme pressure, but how do you create the sort of shared vision in an apostolic community which is built on an unfolding discernment responding authentically to the promptings of the Spirit of the Risen Christ?

### ***Attentive and Discerning***

I would like to start from pairing the virtues of being discerning and being attentive, making sure that the fundamental Ignatian practice of attentiveness to life experience is built into the way in which schools operate, so that the children experience it every day. At the school where I am based, St John’s Beaumont, which is a boarding school, the Examen is the last thing the students do at night. They all sit on the carpet in the dormitory, and they lead it themselves; they do not need staff to help them. It is a really important part of their day, a time when they can just sit and reflect. We have seen how it has a big impact on the way the children relate to the boarding community within the school.

<sup>5</sup> Arturo Sosa, ‘On Discernment in Common’, November 2017, available at [http://www.esdac.net/IMG/pdf/2017\\_09\\_27\\_letter\\_p\\_general\\_on\\_discernment\\_english\\_.pdf](http://www.esdac.net/IMG/pdf/2017_09_27_letter_p_general_on_discernment_english_.pdf), accessed 17 September 2019.



© Jesuit Institute London

*Les Quatres Setmanes d'Exercicis Espirituales I*, by Gemma Guasch and Josep Asuncion

What we are trying to do can be illustrated by this painting, which hangs at the entrance of the spirituality centre at Manresa in Spain, and represents the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises. In it the lighter colours signify my best self, the image of God that is deeply imprinted in me. But they are overlaid with darker lines and blotches—my less good side. We use this image as a poster in schools to help the children to review their day—looking at the light and the dark, the consolation and desolation, what helps me to thrive and what drains that away from me—in a very practical way and a very visual way.

Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, the former Jesuit Superior General, writes, 'discernment ... is a spiritual attitude constitutive of every Christian life'.<sup>6</sup> While it is central to Ignatian spirituality,

discernment is not something that we should separate out and say: this is only Ignatian; this only belongs to our tradition. It is something that the whole of the Christian community owns. Moreover, the term is not limited to the discernment of spirits; it covers everything that Ignatius talked about in the process of election, which is identical to the purpose of the Spiritual Exercises—to seek and find the will of God. This is something that needs to be cleared up very early on: people ask whether we are talking about election, or about the discernment of spirits. But these are two sides of the same coin. In discernment of spirits, what is happening is that I am looking backwards at my experience with God

<sup>6</sup> Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, 'On Apostolic Discernment in Common', 5 November 1986, n.21, available at <https://kolvenbach.jesuitgeneral.org/uploads/on-apostolic-discernment-in-common/On%20Apostolic%20Discernment%20in%20Common.pdf>, accessed 17 September 2019.

in my life over a period of time. In election, thinking about it in a broader sense than a single election made during a long retreat, I am looking forwards. Attentiveness is that looking back, that discernment of spirits, whereas being discerning is looking forwards, considering the options, and making better decisions.

### ***The Practice of Gratitude***

The second thing I wanted to talk about, which has been very powerful working in schools, is the practice of gratitude. This was Ignatius' starting point: the idea of asking for an interior knowledge of all the great good I have received, of how much God our Lord has done for me and how much God has given me (Exx 233–234). I have paired it with the idea of generosity: at the beginning of the Spiritual Exercises you have to practise gratitude, and then at the end there is a generosity that flows out of the process of the Exercises.

In schools we use the practice of gratitude, even separately from the Examen itself, building it into retreat days and into staff development, for example, as the starting point of discussion: what is going well and what have we got to be grateful for in a particular area? Roger Dawson talks about the idea of 'entitlement people' and 'gratitude people': what an 'entitlement' teacher looks like, and what a 'gratitude' teacher—a grateful teacher—looks like. As research on the 'emotional atmosphere' of classrooms has shown, the way in which you represent yourself as a teacher has a long-term impact on your students' achievement.<sup>7</sup>

There is a danger in our culture that, although we may be grateful for many things, we need to pare that feeling down really to experience it. At the end of his life, the novelist Henning Mankell wrote about his approaching death from terminal cancer. For months and months, as the end approached, it was almost like a nuclear winter. It made no sense. What was the point of living? What was the point of his writing if it would all come to this? And then he records one specific morning when he looked out of his hospital window and saw a blackbird on the television aerial, and he heard the blackbird sing, and he writes: '*I have heard the blackbird. I have lived.*'<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Anu Laine, Maija Ahtee and Liisa Näveri, 'Impact of Teacher's Actions on Emotional Atmosphere in Mathematics Lessons in Primary School', *International Journal of Science and Mathematics Education* (2019).

<sup>8</sup> Henning Mankell, 'The Way Out', in *Quicksand: What It Means to Be a Human Being*, translated by Laurie Thompson (London: Harvill Secker, 2016), 133.

We do not need lots of things. We just need, as Ignatius says, a deep interior insight into what we have been given, in order to provoke a profound gratitude that changes our whole outlook on life. This is an idea that we use with children and staff in schools, in trying to say that gratitude is not necessarily about the multifarious things that we have from God, although God gives us so much. Gratitude can be really simple, and this practice of gratitude is another way into discernment.

### ***Right Intention***

But what happens if you are not able to go through a discernment process? Can you still make decisions in a right way, particularly in the pressured environment of a school? I think the answer to this is *right intention*; it is there in the *Spiritual Exercises*, in the preparatory prayer, ‘that all my intentions, actions and operations may be ordered purely to the service and praise of the Divine Majesty’ (Exx 46).

Michael Ivens writes particularly lucidly on this. He explains: ‘the place of decision in his spirituality leads Ignatius to emphasize the distinction between God-directed intention, as a general aspiration, and the effective motivation of a particular choice’. A person may in general support the values and aims of a Catholic school, for example, but have questions when it comes to particular issues. Discernment is all about these particular issues, not something general but something specific. Ivens continues: ‘It is important to establish the place of intention in the situations of daily life, because these correspond to the category of “all things” where the apostle either “finds God” or is trapped in a divided life’.<sup>9</sup> Are we seeking to find God in all things, not only in our particular choices but through having a clear *right intention* in everything we do? The object of this intention is the greater glory of God; all Jesuit schools use the *ad maiorem Dei gloriam* motto. But what does that actually look like in practice?

Ivens says that ‘four fundamental interrelated conditions’ are necessary for right intention.<sup>10</sup> The first is *vision*: you have to have a really powerful sense of ‘the absoluteness of God’, an overwhelming sense of God, of being loved by God and called by God. Then you need *desire* for the glory

<sup>9</sup> Michael Ivens, *Keeping in Touch: Posthumous Papers on Ignatian Topics*, edited by Joseph A. Munitiz (Leominster: Gracewing, 2007), 141.

<sup>10</sup> Ivens, *Keeping in Touch*, 143.

of God. Ivens is quite uncompromising about this; if you read Kolvenbach, or Pedro Arrupe, or Sosa they constantly talk about the material for discernment being the bigger things, the more important decisions. But Michael Ivens says no: we should be using discernment as much as we can, in all the minor details of our lives.

It is interesting that Pedro de Ribadeneira, Ignatius' close companion and official biographer, records that, towards the end of his life, Ignatius rather unkindly accosted an old father in the community in Rome and asks him how many times he had done the Examen that day. The man replied, 'seven', to which Ignatius responded, 'so few!' Ignatius himself did the Examen every hour, and if for some reason he missed it, he would catch up the next hour.<sup>11</sup> The idea develops that what Ignatius asks of us is to build into our lives an almost constant discernment.

Ivens's third condition is *freedom*, which is necessary in order to have a desire, a right intention, in the first place. This freedom is jeopardised by two things. One is the instinctive urge to take control, to be in control of my own life. And the other is a tendency to sanctify my affections. When I like something, I think of it as good, and thus I may promote it to an absolute status, and consider that if it is good it must be what God wants for me. This can be quite beguiling, and quite misleading. The final condition is *self-awareness*. I need to have some psychological insight into myself, because I constantly set up defences and make compromises, trying to shield the things I do not want to recognise about myself. This is where spiritual direction may help.

For Ivens, right intention additionally has two aspects: that of the 'personal quality of life of an individual', and also that of 'the quality of the action and presence in the world of the apostle'.<sup>12</sup> This means that it has an evangelical dimension. Right intention is not just about the kind of person I am, which is, in a way, private; it is also about spreading the gospel.

In the entrance to the cave at Manresa, where Ignatius once lived and prayed, there is a mosaic on the ground of a sunflower, which was created to commemorate the four-hundredth anniversary of the *Spiritual Exercises*. The idea behind this image is that the sunflower faces the sun as it rises and tracks it across the sky; likewise Ignatius found that if you

<sup>11</sup> Pedro de Ribadeneira, *De actis P. Ignatii*, MHSJ FN 2, 345.

<sup>12</sup> Ivens, *Keeping in Touch*, 142.





face God, if you face the sun, you grow and thrive. What does it mean to be facing God? Like the sun, God moves, so right intention cannot be static, but must remain responsive to the situation at the time.

Once you begin to think in terms of right intention, it seems to me that you have already started doing the Spiritual Exercises. ‘What have I done for Christ?’—that is the Examen, looking backwards. ‘What am I doing for Christ?’, and then ‘What ought I to do for Christ?’, are discernment, looking forwards (Exx 53). You have started to line things up so that they move in a particular direction.

### **Who Do I Want to Be?**

Ignatius’ *Autobiography* tells us: ‘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’ (n.11). Ribadeneira, who knew Ignatius better than anyone, says the same thing. When Ignatius looked up at the stars of the night sky he felt overwhelmed by the love of his Creator.

But when you show children an image of the night sky, of the universe, they almost always interpret it as overwhelming in a negative way: in a threatening and belittling way. It frightens them; they do not find it beautiful at all. It makes them feel small, insignificant and ultimately unloved. So, if that terrifies them, how do we replace it? How do we give



people in schools, pupils and staff, a language to talk about the experience of God, about right intention? In Jesuit schools we have developed a profile for our pupils which begins to articulate and name the sorts of virtues that we are trying to promote.

The way we have approached this is based on something that Benedict XVI said when he visited Britain in 2010. Addressing pupils from Catholic schools at St Mary's University Twickenham, Benedict asked them: 'what are the qualities you see in others that you would most like to have yourselves? What kind of person would you really like to be?'<sup>13</sup> It seems to me that this is one of the most important questions that you can ask young people.

So we start with the younger children, talking about what a postman does, what a firefighter does, but we build up a notion of the kind of person that they might want to be, not in terms of what they do in their career, but of the qualities they might want to have. The Pope used the language of saints. 'Saint' is a name we give to people from the past whom we admire in some way for their qualities. And the Pope said, 'I hope that among those of you listening to me today there are some of the future saints of the twenty-first century'.<sup>14</sup> This was quite challenging; you immediately think: so what kind of person *do* I want to be?

We began to work out ways of articulating this idea which would need, first of all, to stay with the children all the way through the school journey, from three-year-olds to eighteen-year-olds. We needed to focus not just on academic learning, but also on that strand of Jesuit and Catholic education which is about learning how to live. Ignatius wrote about the purpose of Jesuit schools being 'for improvement in living and learning' (*Constitutions*, IV.1.1 [440]). And this needed to be Christian and Catholic and Jesuit, but also universal. We could not say that because some people are Muslim or Jewish, or because they have no belief in God, they cannot achieve this goal that we are setting them. It needed to be for adults as well as children, and it needed to be in daily use, not some aspiration that was laminated and put on a poster, or just left on a shelf and forgotten.

This is how we developed the Jesuit pupil profile, in trying to articulate what a good person might look like. The profile consists of eight statements, and each statement contains two virtues which come from the Gospels or from the Ignatian tradition. The first statement, for

<sup>13</sup> Benedict XVI, address of the Holy Father to pupils, 17 September 2010,

<sup>14</sup> Benedict XVI, address of the Holy Father to pupils.

example, says that pupils should be ‘grateful for their own gifts’, which is from the beginning of the Spiritual Exercises, the Examen. It also says they should be ‘generous with their gifts’, which recalls the end of the Exercises and the Contemplation to Attain Love.

We have found the effect of the profile to be transformative. Once you start using a particular vocabulary, the children pick up on it. When we first started experimenting with this, in 2013, we interviewed all the sixth-formers leaving Jesuit schools. They were often very positive about their education, but they did not really see that there was a plan to it. Their response was not particularly coherent. But when we ran the same interviews last year, it was almost frightening how the sixth-formers used our own language back to us. We wondered whether we had brainwashed them. But they were using it absolutely genuinely; the virtues in the profile were ones they could talk about, and this language had become the language of the schools.

Of course we are not promoting these virtues to the exclusion of others, but somehow we have hit upon a particular set that works. Interestingly, the idea is also spreading beyond Jesuit schools: Catholic schools in the Birmingham diocese have adopted the profile, as have those in the Cardiff diocese. When we talk to these schools, we tell them that the profile is very Jesuit, very Ignatian, and they might want to adapt it, but in every case they have left it as it stands. The only place where we have had to change it is in Denmark, where a few of the words did not quite work and we had to use different ones.

The pupil profile is like the parable of the mustard seed. When it is sown in the soil the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds, but it grows into the biggest shrub and puts out great branches so that birds can shelter in its shade. In using the eight statements, the eight word-pairs, we are saying that this is what the mustard seed is about; this is how you grow as a person. We are giving children an answer to the question: what kind of person do I want to be? They may not be exactly like this, but the children can relate to the words and talk about the ideas, and the effect is really powerful, even for the youngest ones.

When I introduced the profile to our early-years teachers I was cautious, because some of the words are quite tricky. But one very experienced head of early years told me that was nonsense: she said, they know *Brontosaurus*, so why should they not use *intentional* or *compassionate*? Young children can learn technical terms and understand that they mean something technical. The little children have a tree—an actual,

### Jesuit Pupil Profile

*Pupils in a Jesuit school are growing to be ...*

**Grateful** for their own gifts, for the gift of other people, and for the blessings of each day; and **generous** with their gifts, becoming men and women for others.

**Attentive** to their experience and to their vocation; and **discerning** about the choices they make and the effects of those choices.

**Compassionate** towards others, near and far, especially the less fortunate; and **loving** by their just actions and forgiving words.

**Faith-filled** in their beliefs and **hopeful** for the future.

**Eloquent** and **truthful** in what they say of themselves, the relations between people, and the world.

**Learned**, finding God in all things; and **wise** in the ways they use their learning for the common good.

**Curious** about everything; and **active** in their engagement with the world, changing what they can for the better.

**Intentional** in the way they live and use the resources of the earth, guided by conscience; and **prophetic** in the example they set to others.

three-dimensional tree—with the virtues on the branches, and when one of them does something generous, say, it is written on a leaf and goes on the ‘generous’ branch. At the end of the week they take all the leaves off and see what they have been like that week. The psychology of this works because you are identifying, commenting on and reinforcing positive behaviour. And the children themselves talk about it almost like the treasure in the field: *this is what I want to be like.*

### The Ignatian Toolkit

While we should never be tempted to treat the Spiritual Exercises simply as a toolkit, I think there are some insights from them that can actually be used in this way, to support discernment in other contexts, such as in schools.

One of these is understanding that there are times to make an election, that we should be careful about when to make particular decisions, especially important ones. Michael Blundell, who was headmaster for

many years in one of our schools, gave me a good piece of advice when I became a head: never make a decision in the last two weeks of term. You may be tired, and fed up, and cynical, but so is everyone else. People you would never normally see will come to your office and ask you to make decisions. Just smile, listen, sit on it and do nothing. This idea that there are good and bad times to make decisions is something we talk about with heads, governors and senior staff.

Other useful Ignatian insights might come from the Presupposition, on how we relate to another person's point of view (Exx 22), or from the Principle and Foundation (Exx 23), on the fundamental orientations of human beings, or from considering what *indifference* means. The presumption of generosity from the Fifth Annotation fits well with the theme of gratitude. Or we could think about the fact that God does persistently call; we may not take any notice, but the Call of the King is there. A lot is said about the *magis* principle, though this can be a dangerous one for schools if it is interpreted as demanding more and more of staff for no more money. As the last Superior General wrote: 'The trouble with translating Magis simply as "More" is that it can too easily be understood as the "More" of a competitive, consumerist culture'.<sup>15</sup>

There is a great variety of possibilities in our Ignatian toolkit, and it may be that you can introduce just one of these every year into a school and begin to talk about it with the governors and senior leadership. One very successful way of bringing ideas forward is using the 'World Café' methodology, which involves hosting and coordinating simultaneous conversations among different groups around a theme. This can be particularly effective when it uses visual facilitation. At a recent conference in the Salford diocese I saw this done with four facilitators at the front making drawings and cartoons of what was coming out of the different conversations, which were presented to participants at the end, and turned out to have much more impact than a written summary.

Another good approach is the French technique of 'le fil rouge', the 'red thread', in which an observer is asked to go around noticing what is happening in different conversations and discussions, and to report back at the end of the event on what he or she has seen and heard. Stonyhurst College recently had a development day looking at the implications of the Rio schools conference, and employed somebody to be the 'red thread';

<sup>15</sup> Adolfo Nicolás, 'Challenges and Issues in Jesuit Education', Manila, 20 July 2009, 3, available at [https://www.educatemagis.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/20090720AN\\_Manila\\_150\\_eng-2009.pdf](https://www.educatemagis.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/20090720AN_Manila_150_eng-2009.pdf).

she wrote up an excellent report that was a lot more challenging than the impression participants might otherwise have taken away from the day.

### ***Discernment in Common***

I return now to thinking about the practice of discernment in common. What we need to do in schools is to create space for the art of discernment to grow and flourish, to establish a dynamic of reflection and prayer. Conversations about how to do this, and when best to do it during the school year, are vital, as is thinking about what the distinction between discernment at a personal level and in common actually means.

Fr Sosa writes:

The conviction that God is acting in history and is constantly communicating with human beings is the assumption on which our efforts to discern in common are based. For this reason, we should seek out those conditions which allow us to hear the Holy Spirit and be guided by Him in our life-mission.<sup>16</sup>

It is interesting that in talking about 'life-mission' (*vida-misión*), Father Sosa encapsulates Michael Ivens's distinction between the two aspects of discernment: it is always about the life of the individual, but also about the apostolate, about being an apostle on a mission. Sosa continues:

For a group of persons who have experience in the discernment of spirits, discernment in common can take the form of a process in which they perceive and weigh the movements which the spirits provoke in the group that is seeking the will of God .... The discernment of spirits makes it possible for the group to become aware of the direction that its life would take if it were to follow one or another movement of spirit, in order to follow the movements of the good spirit.<sup>17</sup>

The Thirty-Second General Congregation had this to say:

There are prerequisites for a valid communitarian discernment. On the part of the individual member of the community, a certain familiarity with the Ignatian rules for the discernment of spirits, derived from actual use; a determined resolution to find the will of God for the community whatever it may cost; and, in general, the dispositions of mind and heart called for and cultivated in the First and Second Weeks of the Exercises. On the part of the community

<sup>16</sup> Sosa, 'On Discernment in Common'.

<sup>17</sup> Sosa, 'On Discernment in Common'.

as such, a clear definition of the matter to be discerned, sufficient information regarding it, and ‘a capacity to convey to one another what each one really thinks and feels’.<sup>18</sup>

Peter-Hans Kolvenbach explicitly added to these prerequisites, upping the game a little,

... the practice of personal prayer, examination of conscience, and spiritual direction, and the repeated experience of the Exercises themselves, made under expert guidance. In addition, the importance of a consciousness and historical awareness of the human and social reality which forms the context of our apostolic commitment needs underlining.

From the communitarian point of view, there must be a clear sense of ‘belonging’, whether to a particular form of apostolate or more generally to the global apostolic mission of the Society.

By way of precondition, obviously, there has to be freedom from serious psychological problems.<sup>19</sup>

I particularly like that one at the end, which assumes that we will all have at least some psychological problems.

The point of these long quotations is to give a sense of the kind of material that we use to open up discussion with key individuals—head teachers, governors, heads of religious education, school chaplains and chaplaincy teams. It is important to identify who these key individuals are: Adolfo Nicolás used to talk about the ‘apostolic core’ of our ministries. Who are the people—whether it be the chair of governors or the cook—who are central to your school being a Christian school, to its proclaiming the gospel?

Once a discernment has taken place, it is also important to think about how the discerned decision is put into practice. There is a danger that when a decision is reached—this is what we are going to do—it is abandoned and no one asks how we are going to do it. Father General writes:

Discernment in common and apostolic planning work in tandem to ensure that decisions are made in the light of the experience of God, and that these decisions are put into practice in such a way that they realize the will of God with evangelical effectiveness.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> GC 32, decree 2, n. 22.

<sup>19</sup> Kolvenbach, ‘On Apostolic Discernment in Common’, n. 34.

<sup>20</sup> Sosa, ‘On Discernment in Common’.

Again we see these two aspects: your own personal formation in the presence of God, *the experience of God*, and also the evangelical purpose. But sometimes these two aspects can get unhitched from one another.

When Ignatius was first going through his conversion, one of the books he read was the *Golden Legend*, a popular collection of medieval hagiographies, which clearly influenced him. There is a story in that book about St Anthony and a young man who came to him and asked him, ‘What should I do to please God?’ St Anthony told the young man three things: always have God before your eyes—we can clearly recognise this in Ignatius, in the Formula of the Institute; do everything according to the testimony of holy scripture—read the Gospels; and stay where you are, where you live—this is a monastic piece of advice, but we should not dismiss it since it also tells us to be persistent, to stick with things.<sup>21</sup>

When we give general advice about putting discernment decisions into practice we tell people: whatever you do, do it with integrity. Do it with love and compassion. Follow the principle of the *magis*, the greater glory of God. Do it with indifference and detachment, if you can, even to the point of *agere contra*, doing the opposite of your own inclinations. And do it with continuing discernment. And we find that giving people a set of principles, almost a list, encourages them to get things done rather than just moving on to the next decision.

The Jesuit Thirty-Third General Congregation tells us:

If we are to fulfil our mission, we must be faithful to that practice of communal apostolic discernment so central to ‘our way of proceeding’, a practice rooted in the Exercises and Constitutions ....

But such an effort runs the risk of failure unless we attend to the practical conditions required for its serious application.<sup>22</sup>

The challenge is actually to use the kinds of tools, techniques and methods I have been talking about here. We can have a conference or write an article, but if something is not useful to people in real situations, having an impact, in this case, on young people’s lives every day, then it is not preaching the gospel.

<sup>21</sup> See Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, translated by William Granger Ryan (Princeton: PUP, 1995), volume 1, 94–95. And compare *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, translated by Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1975), 2.

<sup>22</sup> GC 33, decree 1, nn. 39, 41.





© José Luis Filipo Cabana

### ***The Path of Discernment***

Outside the basilica of Montserrat there is a pavement: a pattern of straight lines which seem to curve. This is a good image for discernment. It is as though we are all following our own paths, whether individually or in our communities, our schools. And then someone crosses our path and both we and the other person slightly change direction. We walk this pavement, constantly encountering people. And in those encounters I think Ignatius would say that we find the idea of God working for us, in other people and in creation, so that in each encounter in our lives—if we are open to it, if we are attentive and therefore discerning—our lives just take a slightly different direction, and ultimately everything comes around to the centre. And the centre is Christ; as the text in the centre of the pavement proclaims: Christ, the head of the body of the Church, which is diffused throughout the whole world, the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega.

**Adrian Porter SJ** has worked in schools for the past thirty years and is currently the director of the Jesuit Institute, an organisation supporting Jesuit and other Catholic schools across the UK.

# TEN RULES FOR ECOLOGICAL DISCERNMENT

Walter Ceyssens

IT HAPPENS TO US all too often: you know what the right thing to do is, but you still do not act on it, as if there is a short circuit between head and hands. This is certainly true for ecological transition, the social and economic shift towards sustainability that is needed in our lives and in our communities. How much inner resistance there is to overcome before we get rid of that handy plastic bag, before we stop packing our lunch in aluminium foil, or are finally going to opt for public transport? Everything becomes even more difficult when we are aware of the gravity and complexity of our ecological problems on a planetary scale. We wonder, then, if it even makes sense to do anything at all.

To achieve sustainable change, we need to be engaged wholeheartedly, and that is often where the shoe pinches. We do not have an easy grip on our feelings, thoughts and motivations. Criticisms of entrenched habits, behavioural patterns and traditions are pertinent here. Many people would prefer not to believe in global warming rather than make the necessary environmentally friendly choices. This is very irrational, of course, but understandable: we would rather close our eyes than face immense and far-reaching ecological challenges. We tend to think that science and technology will offer some miracle solution, but the more you analyse, the clearer it becomes that we need profound socio-economic and cultural changes, as well as a shift in our mentality. Indeed, this mentality is part of the problem: our consumerist behaviour is boundless in its ruthless exploitation of the earth and its inhabitants.

That is why Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Laudato si'*, advocates an 'integrated ecology' (nn. 10, 11, 13 and throughout), in which spirituality plays an essential role. The Pope calls for an 'ecological conversion' (nn. 5, 16, 217, 219, 220), requiring a change in hearts and souls.<sup>1</sup> Ecological

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis makes a connection here with Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum progressio*, n. 14: 'The development we speak of here cannot be restricted to economic growth alone. To be authentic, it must be well rounded; it must foster the development of each man and of the whole man.'

problems—and their solutions—affect everything, all humans, and also the whole human being: hence the need for spirituality.

Spirituality, in fact, opens up our deepest sources of motivation; our difficulties are partly due to a lack of spirituality. Pope Francis quotes his predecessor, Benedict XVI: “The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast.” For this reason, the ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion.’ (n.217) Therefore, if necessary changes are to be sustainable, they must be in keeping with what concerns us most: what has value and meaning for us; how can we be inspired to act? And how can Christian faith help us at this point?

In response to the Pope’s appeal, I propose ten rules for an ecological discernment. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius of Loyola also gives two sets of comments (Exx 313–363) on what can happen inside us if spiritual life is taken seriously: the ups and downs experienced by those who believe and pray. In addition, by means of these ‘rules’, Ignatius wants to ‘help souls’: how do you handle ‘movements of consolation and desolation’, through which you feel you are moving closer to God, or further away?

These ten rules for ecological discernment are in line with Ignatius’ general spiritual rules. They describe the thoughts, feelings and inner movements that can be experienced by those who are committed to ecology, and they show how you can make progress once you have made this basic choice (compare Exx 315). They can be used for both individual and collective discernment. The guidelines do not specify which concrete choices are to be made for the sake of the environment and climate. Ignatius would not have done so either: that is the job of the experts.<sup>2</sup> But we do share Ignatius’ insight that in order to make good choices, including ecological ones, we must be in a right spiritual attitude—in other words, choices are best made ‘in consolation’ (see Exx 175–178, 318).

Finally, I have deliberately chosen not to make a simple adaptation of Ignatius’ original text. I wanted to reflect as much as possible the experience of those who are committed to the climate and the environment. The guidelines are open to further suggestions: readers may feel free to augment them from their own experience.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview and analysis of a hundred climate measures, see *Drawdown: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reverse Global Warming*, edited by Paul Hawken (London: Penguin Random House, 2017). See also the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), at <https://www.ipcc.ch/>.

***1. Experiencing life and nature as a gift, feeling gratitude for creation as our common home, is ecological consolation.***

At the root of our environmental problems, according to Pope Francis in *Laudato si'*, is the way in which we look at nature. If we see the Earth as an inexhaustible stock of resources that are merely at our disposal, if we consider ourselves as the masters of creation (Genesis 1:28) who are not accountable for our consumption of raw materials, plants or animals, then that will influence the way we treat this planet. And so, Pope Francis tells us, we must change our 'utilitarian' outlook (*Laudato si'*, nn. 115, 159, 210, 219) and learn to see creation as a home that has been given to us and that we share with other humans and other living creatures (nn. 67–68).

One type of consolation, then, is to grow into this insight, experiencing joy over the gift that is life—life which flourishes in us and everywhere around us. This relates to the Ignatian theme of *gratitude* which we meet most notably in the Contemplation to Attain Love—the final chord of the Exercises: 'Here it will be to ask for interior knowledge of all the great good I have received, in order that, stirred to profound gratitude, I may become able to love and serve the Divine Majesty in all things' (Exx 233, and compare 234–235).

Gratitude puts us before the Giver of so many good things. We are in relation to the Giver, and in the Giver, in relation to all creatures. Ecological consolation leads us to appreciate more and more all of these relationships, and balances our positions towards them (*Laudato si'*, n. 69). It will lead to changes in how we treat the environment.



© Alex Woods @ Unsplash

**2. Valuing forms of happiness that do not depend on the pursuit of property and being aware of the fact that rhythms and limits may be life-giving is ecological consolation.**

*Non multa sed multum* is a well-known Ignatian motto.<sup>3</sup> It relates to the ‘Second Annotation’ in the Spiritual Exercises: ‘For what fills and satisfies the soul consists, not in knowing much, but in our understanding the realities profoundly and in savouring them interiorly’ (Exx 2). Here I would like to give an ecological twist to this phrase: *less is more*. As a Christian, I refuse to be carried away by a totalitarian economic logic. I do not want to plunder the Earth for wealth in order to assert myself as an individual or as a community. There is no need for this, for there is real joy in a simpler lifestyle.

Ecological consolation goes against various tendencies in contemporary society: the continuous pursuit of economic growth; extensive exploitation of the planet; uncontrolled consumption; our mimetic desire (*what other people have I also want to have*); ‘FOMO’ syndrome—*Fear of Missing Out*. We crave as many experiences as possible, but why not seek for ‘JOMO’—the *Joy of Missing Out*? To achieve that simplicity we may consider the Principle and Foundation (Exx 23). There Ignatius indicates that indeed we do have a limit put on our ‘use’ of earthly things—the principle of *tantum ... quantum*: ‘From this it follows that we ought to use these things *to the extent that* they help us toward our end, and free ourselves from them to the extent that they hinder us from it’. Respect for this limit will help us to ‘praise, reverence and serve God’: the fundamental aim of human life.

**3. Growing in virtues such as wisdom, justice, courage and temperance; faith, hope and charity; wonder, patience and empathy; true joy and a sense of humour—and practising them with pleasure—is ecological consolation.**

Today’s ecological challenges force us to make choices in extremely complicated matters. For that reason we need firm attitudes that enable us to make good choices in various and changing circumstances. In philosophy and theology, these firm attitudes are called *virtues*.

Ignatius also mentions virtues in his *Spiritual Exercises*. At the end of his description of consolation, for example, he writes:

<sup>3</sup> The idea originates in the classical world and versions of it can be found in Pliny and Quintilian.

Finally, under the word consolation I include every increase in hope, faith, and charity, and every interior joy which calls and attracts one toward heavenly things and to the salvation of one's soul, by bringing it tranquillity and peace in its Creator and Lord (Exx 316).

Ignatius refers to 'joy' alongside the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. True consolation always seems to have an element of joy in it. It is a sign that we ourselves are on the right track of ecological conversion, and it is also appealing to others who may want to choose the same path. I am also happy to mention a sense of humour as a virtue.

In the course of the Spiritual Exercises, as we go through the meditations and the contemplations of the four Weeks, Christian and human virtues flourish within us. Increasingly the virtues acquire meaning for us and determine more and more our being and our actions. *Laudato si'*, for its part, speaks of 'ecological virtues' (n.88). A culture that makes space for these virtues is more likely to succeed in making the ecological transition (see, for example, *Laudato si'*, n.224).

#### **4. A desire for action is ecological consolation.**

The hallmark of a healthy Christian spirituality is its fruitfulness. Inspired by Jesus, we feel the desire to act and to live in a different way. Ignatius also writes in the Contemplation to Attain Love: 'Love ought to manifest itself more by deeds than by words' (Exx 230). The desire to *do something* when a believer is touched by environmental issues is a form of consolation. We do well to respect that desire. It may indeed be a sign that we need to change our lives.

*Laudato si'* contains plenty of concrete recommendations for action: reducing and sorting waste, being economical with water, avoiding squandering food (n.206), taking into account our ecological footprint (n.211), all kinds of social, economic and political choices and so on. Pope Francis draws attention even to the smallest gestures, referring to the 'Little Way' of St Thérèse of Lisieux: everyday, loving actions can break through the logic of violence, selfishness and exploitation (n.230).

#### **5. An imaginative exercise for achieving ecological consolation.**

Ignatius gives a variety of imaginative exercises to achieve greater freedom and consolation in the process of making choices: think of someone you do not know giving you advice; see yourself lying on your deathbed or standing before God at the Last Judgment—at that moment, what would you like to have done in the course of your past life? (Exx 185–187).



Based on Pope Francis's ideas about integral ecology in *Laudato si'*, I propose a prayer exercise to achieve greater ecological consolation. Consider, in your imagination, future generations; consider the poor and nature: how would they look at us; what would they tell us today? During my prayer I let different voices enter into my heart—the voices of future generations, of the poor and of nature. Because of the complexity of the ecological challenges they need to sit at the negotiating table in order to achieve solutions for our global problems, anyway. Is it helpful to think about them when pondering over this or that choice, while determining a personal or common course of action?

Why choose these particular imaginary interlocutors? First, the Pope extends the concept of 'neighbour' to future generations. Creation is a gift that also belongs to them (*Laudato si'*, n.159). Thinking of our children and grandchildren is a strong incentive to change our behaviour and mentality. Further, integral ecology cannot be achieved without integrating the perspective of the poor (which receives 61 mentions in *Laudato si'*!): their voices must be heard if we are to bring about sustainable change. And last, as the philosopher Michel Serres affirms, nature wants to tell us something through phenomena such as climate change, with science taking on the role of interpreter.<sup>4</sup>



© Oxfam

<sup>4</sup> See Michel Serres, *Times of Crisis: What the Financial Crisis Revealed and How to Reinvent Our Lives and Future*, translated by Anne-Marie Feenberg-Dibn (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 36–48.



**6. To think ‘What we do does not matter; the situation is irreversible anyway’, is ecological desolation.**

**7. To think ‘How could I ever change what I have been doing all my life? I’ll never be able to’, is ecological desolation.**

**8. To think ‘Others do not act, so why should I?’, or, ‘I’m standing all by myself’, is ecological desolation.**

The three rules above describe thoughts that can be classified as ‘ecological desolation’. Ignatius attributes desolation to the workings of the ‘evil spirit’ or the ‘enemy of human nature’. The evil spirit wants to make us feel unnecessarily bad about ourselves, and gives us the impression that even God has abandoned us. The evil spirit often distorts our view of ourselves and our relationship with God, making it one-sided. He breaks down reasons and motivations that allow us to grow in faith, hope and love (see Exx 317).

By ecological desolation I refer to feelings of discouragement which sometimes overwhelm anyone who wants to address ecological problems. You believe that the state of the Earth is hopeless (rule 6). You no longer have faith in your ability to change (rule 7). You feel that you are entirely on your own, and every effort to help the planet and humanity seems insignificant and pointless (rule 8). Ignatius’ description of the soul in a state of desolation seems perfectly appropriate to me:

... an impulsive motion toward low and earthly things, or disquiet from various agitations and temptations. These move one toward 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. (Exx 317)

How do we counter such feelings? This will be addressed in the next rule.

**9. Resist ecological desolation: acknowledge failure and sinfulness, still trusting in God’s mercy. After you fall, you can get up again. We can always start afresh and take a first step.**

We want to plead guilty for the current state of the Earth. It is for the most part caused by human behaviour. Likewise, we do not seem to be able to change ourselves despite our good intentions. Our cultural context is so centred on consumption, and it seems so difficult to change mindsets and patterns of behaviour, both in ourselves and in others. Commitment to the environment is tough work, seemingly a losing battle.

**Feelings  
of fear and  
guilt are not  
bad in  
themselves**

In secular discussions about climate change, notions such as ‘eco-anxiety’ and ‘eco-guilt’ appear—the fear that nothing we do will help, that our efforts are constantly falling short, that we are failing to meet the challenge. From a Ignatian point of view, feelings of fear and guilt are not bad in themselves: they can be warning signs telling us that something is not right in our way of life. Ignatius tells us that God is speaking to us in that way through our conscience: ‘In the case of persons who are going from one mortal sin to another ... the good spirit uses a contrary procedure. Through their good judgment on problems of morality he stings their consciences with remorse.’ (Exx 314)

But what happens when feelings of guilt become paralysing and prevent us from taking responsibility and acting? At that moment, Ignatius would say they are a sign of desolation and come from the evil spirit. In order to resist the feelings of desolation associated with these thoughts, it is important to acknowledge our vulnerability to sin. In the second exercise of the First Week (a meditation on personal sin), Ignatius even asks that we pray for it as a form of consolation: ‘to ask for what I desire ... for growing and intense sorrow and tears for my sins’ (Exx 55).

Spiritual desolation can also come about ‘through our own fault’ (Exx 322); evidently this is also true for ecological desolation. *Laudato si’* shows us many examples of the mistreatment of the Earth that, from a faith perspective, can be qualified as sinful. Pope Francis quotes Patriarch Bartholomew of the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Australian Catholic bishops:

Patriarch Bartholomew has spoken in particular of the need for each of us to repent of the ways we have harmed the planet .... For ‘to commit a crime against the natural world is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God’. (n.8)

The Australian bishops spoke of the importance of such conversion for achieving reconciliation with creation: ‘To achieve such reconciliation, we must examine our lives and acknowledge the ways in which we have harmed God’s creation through our actions and our failure to act. We need to experience a conversion, or change of heart.’ (n.218)

Sinful attitudes do not only concern interpersonal relationships but also creation: ‘human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself’. But these relationships have been broken by the Fall:

This rupture is sin. The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations. (*Laudato si'*, n. 66)

But the ecologically committed believer can feel strengthened by faith in a merciful God who always wants to give us fresh chances: before God, we can always start with a clean slate, and that is precisely what encourages us to go further along the path we have taken. We need to be merciful and patient with ourselves and with others, as God is patient with us (Exx 321). 'Eco-fundamentalism' or 'eco-extremism' are not helpful in this respect.

In the Spiritual Exercises, retreatants gain a personal experience of God's mercy. The First Week culminates in a cry of joy for the rediscovered life-energy which comes from the deep sense of being forgiven and which opens up new avenues. Ignatius involves the whole of Creation:

This is an exclamation of wonder and surging emotion, uttered as I reflect on all creatures and wonder how they have allowed me to live and have preserved me in life .... the heavens, the sun, the moon, the stars, and the elements; the fruits, birds, fishes, and animals. And the earth: How is it that it has not opened up and swallowed me ... ? (Exx 60)

In the Second Week we now can follow a new path of life in the footsteps of Jesus.

The feelings of ecological consolation described in the first five rules are clear signs that we are progressing on the way of 'ecological conversion', avoiding ecological sinfulness and the ecological desolation connected to it. Moreover they also actively help us to tackle ecological desolation. I would like to compare them to Ignatius' own suggestions on how to deal with desolation in Exx 319:

Although we ought not to change our former resolutions in time of desolation, it is very profitable to make vigorous changes in ourselves against the desolation, for example, by insisting more on prayer, meditation, earnest self-examination, and some suitable way of doing penance.

Rules 1 and 5 (and, after this, 10) invite us to pray, and thus to internalise a Christian perspective on creation. In addition, rules 2, 3 and 4 presuppose a conversion from a desolate life of possessiveness and consumption to a consoling, ecologically minded way of life, that is, 'doing penance'.

In the Spiritual Exercises the meditation on the Two Standards is about the choice between a life of riches, worldly honour and pride on the one hand, and a life of poverty, humiliations and humility, advocated by Christ, on the other:<sup>5</sup>

Consider the address which Christ our Lord makes to all his servants and friends whom he is sending on this expedition. He recommends that they endeavour to aid all persons, by attracting them, first, to the most perfect spiritual poverty and also, if the Divine Majesty should be served and should wish to choose them for it, even to no less a degree of actual poverty; and second, by attracting them to a desire of reproaches and contempt, since from these results humility. In this way there will be three steps: the first, poverty in opposition to riches; the second, reproaches or contempt in opposition to honour from the world; and the third, humility in opposition to pride. Then from these three steps they should induce people to all the other virtues. (Exx 146)

We can translate this into ecological terms as follows: following Jesus means consuming less (poverty); renouncing prestige based on appearance and possession (insults and contempt); and cherishing solidarity with God's creation (humility—in Latin *humilitas* is derived from 'humus' or 'earth').

With this in mind, it is also good to appreciate the value of the *first step*. A new, more environmentally conscious life will only start with this one step, a step which is within our capabilities, which will provide us with a small sense of victory but which then will encourage us to continue.

### **10. The ultimate ecological consolation is receiving the grace to become a mystic of creation.**

The ultimate source of spiritual consolation is to be touched by the wonder of creation itself—lifting up our hearts towards the Creator. Pope Francis talks about this in *Laudato si'* n.84, but I would especially like to quote Ignatius of Loyola's own example: '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' (*Autobiography*, n.11). In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius also expresses this sense of wonder in the Contemplation to Attain Love:

<sup>5</sup> For a different ecological approach to the Two Standards, see Joan Carrera i Carrera and Llorenç Puig, 'Toward an Integral Ecology', *Cristianisme i Justícia*, 165 (October 2017).

I will consider how God dwells in creatures; in the elements, giving them existence; in the plants, giving them life; in the animals, giving them sensation; in human beings, giving them intelligence; and finally, how in this way he dwells also in myself, giving me existence, life, sensation, and intelligence; and even further, making me his temple, since I am created as a likeness and image of the Divine Majesty. (Exx 235)

Here Ignatius appears to have become a *mystic of creation*. Coming to the end of these ‘rules for ecological discernment’, we too can pray and ask for the ecological consolations that can make us true mystics of creation (compare Exx 316): a heart inflamed with love for God’s creative work; tears of wonder at the world’s majesty and beauty of the universe—despite all pollution, injustice and disaster—a deep sense of faith in love for all creatures, both human and non-human.

**Walter Ceyssens SJ** lives in Leuven and works there as programme coordinator of the Lerkeveld student residence and as spiritual director of the Johannes XXIII diocesan seminary. During the summer of this year he accompanied the Ignatian ‘Ecofriendly’ experiment at the MAGIS Europe event in Lithuania.

# TOWARDS A GREATER SENSE OF REALITY

## Ignatian Discernment between Spiritual Life and Mission

Patrick Goujon

THERE IS A KEY MOMENT in St Ignatius' life when, all of a sudden, 'His eyes were opened a little'.<sup>1</sup> At this moment, he was taking the first step in discovering the gift of discernment. I would like to begin from this *opening*, and suggest that discernment is probably more a way of living, a quality of life, than a process, a series of actions to achieve an end. There is an end and there *are* actions, as I will describe them, following the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Constitutions* of the Jesuits. (The *Spiritual Exercises* are certainly necessary when we speak of Ignatian discernment, but I would also suggest that the *Constitutions* may be very useful, not only for the Jesuits, but for all of us. The *Constitutions* say very little about discernment, but they describe a way of living out spiritual life and mission.) Discernment is ultimately a question of *tact*: 'skill and sensitivity in dealing with others'.<sup>2</sup>

I would like to sketch out the three actions involved in discernment: to feel; to pray and to decide; to act. But I hope I can insist on the way this *process* is integrated into the movement of life. For us as human beings, this means being rooted in reality and finding our way through it. As Christians, we are invited to make our common reality in an evangelical way. But what does that mean?

### **To Feel**

We all know that in Spanish *sentir* is a key word in the *Spiritual Exercises*. To feel, for Ignatius, is not just a question of sensation. It is rather a link

I am grateful to Bryan Norton SJ for reading through the English version of this text.

<sup>1</sup> *Autobiography*, n. 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*.

between myself, others and God. Feelings are a gateway to our interiority. But pure sensations are not sufficient. We need to reflect on them, to discover their meaning. This might sound very intellectual. In fact, it is more a question of movement and orientation than full signification.

### *Differences*

Let us go back to that famous step in Ignatius' biography. When Ignatius was in bed, reading his books, he noticed a difference in his thoughts. Some left him delighted and happy, others dry and discontented. And then, as he said, his eyes were opened: 'He began to marvel at this difference in kind and to reflect on it ... little by little coming to know the difference in kind of spirits that were stirring: the one from the devil, and the other from God'.<sup>3</sup> To notice the difference and reflect on it is the most important step—an opening, as Ignatius said.

May I quote, just for once, a French Jesuit, from the seventeenth century? Jean-Joseph Surin was a great preacher, a spiritual director and a writer. He was also very famous in his time because he was an exorcist at Loudun. After he released the nuns of Loudun from possession (this was the seventeenth century; there is no devil in France any more) Surin fell into a profound depression, a kind of madness, in which he thought that he himself was possessed and sentenced to damnation by God. There is a very important remark in his diary from this time. Surin described—and remember he was born in Bordeaux—the most significant sign that he was lost: 'the savor of the wine had been taken from me and seemed effectively to



*Jean-Joseph Surin, by Étienne Gantrel, late  
seventeenth century*

<sup>3</sup> *Autobiography*, n. 8.



be water .... It truly was a damned person's life on earth, and in my spirit I would often think about Cain.<sup>4</sup>

When we cannot feel such differences, life seems like chaos. To feel the differences is not just 'to feel'. To notice differences and reflect on them is an openness, a kind of birth. The world is not just the place where we were *put*, as if we had been thrown down on the earth. We are a part of it, interacting with it (with other people, with all of creation) and this marks us, has an effect on us. Things and people make a difference to us.

### *Movements*

The world, according to Ignatius, is a *moving* world: 'moving' as 'producing emotion', but also, and first, 'in motion'. This is very clear in the Principle and Foundation, although it is often hidden in our translations. The global idea of this famous text is that we have to choose what helps us to 'praise, reverence and serve God' (Exx 23).<sup>5</sup> The motif of choice is repeated at the beginning and at the end.

The human person is created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and by so doing to save his or her soul. The other things on the face of the earth are created for human beings in order to help them to pursue the end for which they are created.

And in conclusion: 'we should desire and choose only what helps us more towards the end for which we are created'.

The Spanish text marks an important difference between the two sentences. In the first sentence, the verb 'help' translates *ayudar*. In the last one, the Spanish verb is *conducir* (to lead, to bring to). In the medieval conception of things, inherited from the Greek philosophers and the Fathers of the Church, things in the world have a certain weight, a gravitational pull that leads us, moves us forward. This is clearly expressed by 'towards'. We contribute to the movement of the world. To put it in our language: this life affects me, has an impact on me, because, as a human being, I am sensitive. But I am not just a 'feeling machine'; as a sensitive person, I also have desires. I am attracted or repelled by things around

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Joseph Surin, *The Experimental Science of the Things of the Other Life*, in *Into the Dark Night and Back: The Mystical Writings of Jean-Joseph Surin*, edited by Robert A. Maryks, translated by Patricia Ranum (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 192.

<sup>5</sup> This article uses the English version of the *Spiritual Exercises in Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, translated by Philip Endean and Joseph A. Munitiz (London: Penguin, 1996).

me. And thus arises the issue of my liberty. Do I follow everything by which I am attracted? Do I flee everything I dislike? If we do so, we are no longer free and, thus, we are losing the most precious gift of God: God's grace, our liberty.

When we speak of discernment, what is it all about? We can ask: where is my life going, in which direction? Where does its movement come from? Where is it leading me? And, then, in a very concrete way: how do I use my freedom to lead my own life, what or whom do I follow? Am I in control of my attachments? And the global movement suggested by the evangelical sense of freedom is to make a step forward from a felt affection to a willed decision.

### *Love*

This step from affection to a decision is at stake in the Exercises, in the Call of the King. Here the exercitant has to imagine a king, an 'earthly king', who calls his people to help and serve him in a great battle. This meditation is given to help the retreatant find his or her way—which means, for Ignatius, to follow the Christ—in any sort of life. If you have a look at the Spanish text once more, you will notice that it is a question of a decision about commitment. The English speaks of: 'Those who will want to respond in a spirit of love, and to distinguish themselves by the thoroughness of their commitment to their Eternal King' (Exx 97). In Spanish, this is written: 'Los que mas se querrán afectar y señalar en todo servicio de su rey eterno'.

The English translation here is really excellent: it gives a sort of commentary on the Spanish verb *afectar*, which, like the English word 'affection', means etymologically 'to come closer' (Latin *affectare*, frequentative of *afficere*, to lay out). I am trying to suggest that we need a very physical sense of what it is going on: to choose is to *dispose* (First Annotation), to lay things and relations out, as far as possible, to interact with people around me, to decide that my (felt, passive) *affection* should become a willed *decision*—which is to say, an attachment in the positive sense of the term.

This is what happens for retreatants during the Second Week. Their feelings are moved by the contemplation of the life of Jesus Christ in the Gospel. They learn to recognise their feelings (attraction, rejection, joy, sadness) as those feelings are moved, first of all, in their relationship with Jesus, in their prayer. Michael Ivens puts it this way: 'Consolation "consoles" because whatever its form, whether ambiguous or implicit and

discreet, it is a felt experience of God's love building up the Christ-life in us'.<sup>6</sup>

Discernment leads our life, as it were, in the movement of love when we 'put off self-love, self-will and self-interest' (Exx 189). And, as the Contemplation to Attain Love puts it, we receive love from above. This movement out of ourselves is not self-denying but a liberation to find our place in the world and in our relationships. This may sound a bit too celestial, but it is in fact as concrete as possible. Turning to the *Constitutions* of the Jesuits, we will see how this movement is both realistic and spiritual.

### **To Pray and to Decide**

Prayer is a very practical activity, because it may lead to our transformation and that of the world. I shall underline three more verbs here: to consider, to recollect oneself and to judge (*mirar, recoger, juzgar*).

The seventh part of the *Constitutions* deals with the mission of the Jesuits. This is not just a question of putting mission first, but of the way Jesuits should behave 'in regard to their neighbour' (VII.1.1 [603]), as the Gospel itself says. The emphasis is not on the missions but on the relationships. Implicitly, it refers to the great commandment of love as the first rule (Mark 12:31). But this has to be discerned (*discreta caritas*, a discerning love). This love is very discreet, and it is not a topic as such in the *Constitutions*, which are discussing how to send Jesuits on mission and what happens after a Jesuit is sent somewhere.

The one who sends Jesuits out, whether the General or any superior, always follows the same process. The first authority who sends is the Pope, and nothing is said about him except that he sends them 'to any place where he judges it expedient' (VII.1.1 [603]). Then, the General or other superiors send too, again wherever they 'judge to be expedient'. The *Constitutions* specify that the mission must be given in a 'pure intention in the presence of God our Lord, and ... commending the matter to his Divine Majesty' (VII.2.1 [618]).

The General and other superiors who send Jesuits have to pray, to recollect themselves and to find themselves indifferent. Then, and this is the point, the Jesuits who have been sent may in turn have to decide for themselves how long to stay—whether to remain for a longer period or not, if nothing precise has been said by any authority. And they

<sup>6</sup> Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998), 206.

have to follow the same steps: to consider the circumstances and find themselves indifferent, to make their prayer and then to judge.

Someone  
 who is sent to a broad territory  
     such as the Indies or other provinces,  
     and for whom no particular region is assigned,  
 may remain for longer or shorter periods in one place or another,  
 going off to whatever places he deems<sup>7</sup> [*juzgar*]  
     after having weighed [*mirar*] the various factors,  
     found himself indifferent as to his will,  
     and made his prayer [*oración*] to be more expedient for the  
 glory of God our Lord. (VII.3.1 [633])<sup>8</sup>

These three steps build up the interior life of the Jesuit on mission, within the exterior life when he is in action. The triple structure is like a generative cell, an organic unit that grows within him, everywhere and always. And this cell generates a certain way of living, in which you consider a situation, weigh it and decide what to do in a spiritual way. You find the source of your action in the freedom you receive from God ('pure intention': I am not looking out for myself, my own interests). This cell is both spiritual and very practical.

When a Jesuit who is on mission sees a new opportunity, which has not been anticipated



*The Jesuit missionary Ignacio Raphael Coromina,  
 by Joseph Morales, eighteenth century*

<sup>7</sup> Old English *dēman* (also in the sense 'act as judge'), of Germanic origin, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>8</sup> To assist in understanding the text, I have laid out the sentences in accordance with their grammar. Such an approach has been used in several workshops with my students at the Centre Sèvres, and with János Lukács and Gilles Mongeau. I thank them all for their suggestions. For more on the *Constitutions* see János Lukács, *Ignatian Formation: The Inspiration of the Constitutions* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2016).

by his superiors, he may, in respect of his principal mission, decide for himself what to do. But the *Constitutions* specify a very important point. The movement that leads to the decision is the same: to consider, to pray, to judge what is suitable. And Ignatius adds:

He can and should consider [*mirar*]  
without prejudice to his mission,  
as has been said  
what other activities he can undertake  
for the glory of God and the good of souls,  
not losing the opportunity for this which God may send him,  
to the extent that he will judge [*parecer*] expedient [*convenir*] in  
the Lord. (VII. 1. 7 [616])

In other words, when I consider a situation, and if I make myself indifferent, I may or may not find it expedient to take an opportunity that God may have sent me. I have to decide, on discovering the opportunity from God, if it is expedient or not to follow it. I would call this the ‘mystical moment’ of the *Constitutions*: a moment of friendly partnership between me and God, when I can act freely because I am not led by any ‘disordered attachments’. My movements are free, so I can choose any particular thing.

My spiritual freedom is in fact linked to this ability to perceive my situation: it starts from a very practical viewpoint, my *circumstances* (literally, ‘that which stands around’). This perceptiveness is instilled into Jesuits from the novitiate. Seen as a time to grow in abnegation, humility and self-denial, the period of novitiate, however, also builds the generative cell of praying and deciding in the novice. He has to be encouraged to balance abnegation with a ‘proper concern’ (*cuidado*; care) for his own health:

Consequently,  
when they perceive [*sentir*]  
that something is harmful to them  
or that something else is necessary  
in regard to their diet, clothing, living quarters, office, or  
occupation, and similarly of other matters,  
all ought to give notice of this to the superior or to the one whom  
he appoints.

The *Constitutions* point out how novices should proceed to follow the same basic process:

First,  
    before informing him  
they should recollect [*recoger*] themselves to pray,  
    and after this,  
    if they feel [*sentir*]  
    that they ought to represent the matter to him who is in charge,  
they should do so.

Second,  
    once they have represented it by word of mouth or by a short note  
    so that he will not forget,  
they should leave the whole care of the matter to him  
and regard what he ordains [*ordenare*] as better,  
    without arguing or insisting upon it either themselves or through  
    another,  
        whether he grants the request or not.

For the subject must persuade himself that  
    what the superior decides  
        after being informed  
is more suitable [*convenir*] for the divine service and the subject's own  
greater good in our Lord. (III. 2. 1 [292])

It is clear enough that the global framework is training the novice for an obedience in which the Jesuit puts off his self-interest. It is noticeable how this generative cell is inseminated, so to speak, from the beginning, in the novitiate, at a very practical, physical level. The freedom starts from the earth, grounded in our situation. Discernment is linked to our incarnation. Discerning the 'spirits' means noticing the differences between the ways we react to various situations in order to act freely, that is, according to the great commandment of loving God and one's neighbours. Spiritual discernment is *realistic*.

### **To Act**

Discernment leads us to decide and to act. It implies our capacity to get rid of our self-centred interests. The one who discerns receives a gift of freedom *for real*, to find and use his or her freedom in his or her situation. This movement involves a certain sort of relationship within the Church in order to live out our discerning capacity. Pope Francis certainly calls us to that sort of relationship, and I would like to understand it from an Ignatian viewpoint, in particular.

How is discernment helping to build our personality, to make us act as subjects? This will also define our roles if we are spiritual directors or counsellors.

*Giving and Receiving Help*

The Spiritual Exercises are defined as a way of helping people, and this also accords with the overall title given to the seventh part of the *Constitutions*: ‘the relations to their neighbour of those already incorporated into the Society when they are dispersed into the vineyard of Christ Our Lord’. In this chapter Ignatius runs through the areas where help can be given using two methods: preaching the Word of God and holy conversations, which bring together counsel and advice as the Spiritual Exercises do. Nevertheless, it is by one single instrument that people are to be helped: the *word*, whether in the public domain, the world of preaching, or the private one of conversation.

A double movement inspires the *Constitutions*: on the one hand, there is a widening out towards greater numbers of people and less confined spaces (from the churches of the Society into public squares or anywhere suitable); and, on the other hand, there is an inverse narrowing, focusing upon a few chosen individuals—those likely to profit from the full Spiritual Exercises—rather than the multitude. But in extending the area of missionary activity and diversifying the types of word involved (preaching, exhortation, conversation, prayer) are all seen from the same perspective: helping our neighbour. The aim is to provide for all (hence the public square) even though the methods used may vary—from preaching for the many to giving the complete Exercises to only a few. This contraction from the many to the individual is rooted in a conception of help that has to be underlined: ‘The Exercises are to be adapted to the capabilities of *those who want to engage in them*, i.e. age, education or intelligence are to be taken into consideration’ (Exx 18).

The wording here is worth noting: instead of talking about those whom *he* wants to help, Ignatius refers to those who themselves want to be helped. Ignatius places the person who is to be helped as the subject of the sentence. It is not the director (an expression never used by Ignatius), nor even the person who accompanies, who comes first, but rather whoever it is who comes seeking help. In return, the person who ‘gives the Exercises’ (to use Ignatius’ way of speaking) has to decide what circumstances will allow the person to find out how best to proceed. That is the moment when the one who gives the Exercises will choose what is appropriate from the variety of exercises outlined in the little handbook.



*Models of Spiritual Direction*

When we speak of a 'discerning Church', I hope it is clear that the primary person who discerns is the one who wants to make a decision for his or her personal life. This does not mean that there is no help to offer or counsels to give, but the process of discernment concerns the one who decides first.

This has not always been clear during the long story of spiritual direction. Roughly, two patterns may be sketched out.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, there is a *directive pattern*. Here, the spiritual direction relationship is built on a strong division between the clergy and the faithful. The priest, in this case, is a kind of intermediary between God, or, more precisely, the law of the Church, and the faithful. The priest will help the layperson to implement the law in his or her situation.

The second model, by contrast, which we can call *mystical*, does not rely on the division between the clergy and the faithful. It assumes, rather, the 'same Spirit who governs and directs us for the good of our souls' (Exx 365). This model, developed by Ignatius, implies that we can learn from a spiritual guide to decipher how we are directed by the Holy Spirit. This pattern includes three 'partners': the counsellor, the one who wants help and God. It rests upon the conviction that God communicates Godself (*Autobiography*, n. 15) and works (Exx 236) in everyone.

It is certainly demanding to learn to discover God's action in our lives, but God gives some clear signs of it to each of us, when we feel joy or, more precisely, when we experience any 'increase of hope, faith and charity' (Exx 316). The call to a 'discerning Church' should lead us to help people to discover how their lives are orientated by consolation. It does not mean that there are no more laws, but the laws are not considered first. They help us on our way to receive our lives from God.

I know this position raises a lot of difficulties. But we should remember that, in the Bible, the Decalogue is preceded by the memory of the liberation. In the Ignatian pedagogy for discernment, it is not possible to forget these three partners: the one who wants help, the counsellor and the Holy Spirit. That is why the first two steps are 'to feel' and 'to pray'. The counsellor is a sort of witness to our spiritual connection to God. The spiritual tradition consist in a kind of wisdom: ways to interpret the action of God in our lives.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Goujon, *Les Politiques de l'âme. Jésuites français et direction spirituelle à l'époque moderne* (Paris: Garnier, 2019).

### ***A Church of Gratitude***

It is high time to go back to one of the rare definitions of discernment in the New Testament. Paul prays to God for the Philippians to receive the gift of discernment.

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless. (Philippians 1:9–10)

Literally: it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all *aesthesis*—perception. This perception, which could also be translated as *tact*, is rooted in charity, in love. The source of discernment, as a sense of feeling, perceiving and dealing with others, is the gift of God's love. To discern is to be connected, attuned, to God's love, to the way God acts in our world.

An evangelical life is one attuned to God's action among us. We are invited, then, to harmonize our lives with the Spirit of God. Our action—our discerned action, *discreta actio*—is a certain way of living, a quality of life, *quaedam via ad Deum*, a certain way to God, as Ignatius wrote about the Society. Not 'the' way, but 'one' way, attuned to God, and open to our neighbours, to all creation, to all that we receive from the bounty of God.

A final word: when Ignatius' eyes opened, he became aware of God's action in all things. This awareness filled him with gratitude and led him to service. Or, as he puts it in the *Spiritual Exercises*: 'acknowledging with gratitude we may be able to love and serve His Divine Majesty in everything' (Exx 233). A discerning Church should be a Church of gratitude, to God and to one another.

**Patrick Goujon SJ** is a professor at the Centre Sèvres in Paris. He is an adviser to the journal *Études*, and writes on the history of spiritual direction.

# A WORKSHOP ON VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT

*Ruth Holgate*

WITHIN ROMAN CATHOLIC CIRCLES, the term *vocation* has often been restricted to those living as priests or religious brothers and sisters, monks and nuns. In such cases vocational discernment is the process of deciding whether one of these ways of life might be for you. In England and Wales the Bishops' Conference has established a National Office for Vocations. Under the leadership of the Benedictine abbot Christopher Jamieson, the office has set up and trained a network of vocation guides to accompany young people in a broader vocational discernment process. I became involved as one of those invited to help train such guides.

As a retreat giver and spiritual director, I have often helped people to discern God's call in different aspects of their lives. From this perspective, the discernment of a call to religious life is simply one facet of a much wider process. So I was pleased that the framework for the guides' training process was going to take this wider view, to 'change from recruitment to discernment' in Fr Christopher's words. At the 2019 St Beuno's Conference I led a workshop on the vocational discernment process.

*If someone asked me about my own vocation, I would start by saying ... ?* Participants in the workshop were initially asked to take some time to consider this question. Their responses were focused by being challenged to name their vocation in seven words or fewer! Stepping back from actually doing this, they were then invited to acknowledge what it was like to talk about their vocation in this way. It was certainly an unusual experience for most people, and likely to feel somewhat uncomfortable, putting them on the spot.

This led to a discussion of whether the term *vocation* is useful at all in the context of the contemporary Church. For many it has at best a limited range of associations, and these may even be (for instance, as a result of the widespread media coverage of abuse carried out by clergy) principally negative. You might want to try yourself to see what word

associations *vocation* suggests to you. Yet, like any technical term, it has its uses and, if it is rooted in a sense that each person is individually called by the God who knows them intimately, it can still be powerful. Starting from this broad outlook, the National Office for Vocations works with a framework that recognises three dimensions of God's call for each person, and the workshop moved forward by considering each of these in turn.

- The first dimension is the universal call to holiness, as explored in chapter 5 of Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*. God the Father calls people to listen to the Son, to be baptized in the Holy Spirit, and to live as disciples of Christ. In this context Ephesians 4:1 is relevant: 'lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called'.
- The second is the call to a particular way of life. Christian disciples will express their faith, hope and love through living as a consecrated person, an ordained minister, or a lay person in the married or the single state. This typology is laid out in paragraph 43 of *Lumen gentium*.
- The third dimension is the call to work. God calls people to many different kinds of work, ranging from paid employment to care of family members. However, work on its own does not give meaning to life; rather, human beings make work meaningful. As Pope John Paul II wrote in paragraph 6 of his encyclical on work, *Laborem exercens*: 'It is always man who is the purpose of work, whatever work it is that is done by man—even if the common scale of values rates it as the merest "service", as the most monotonous, even the most alienating work'. He went on to point out, in paragraph 11, that 'work constitutes one of the most fundamental dimensions of a person's earthly existence and their vocation'.

Having explored this framework, those engaged in the workshop were invited to reconsider the description of their own sense of vocation that each had shared earlier, now trying to identify the three dimensions as they themselves had experienced them. This allowed for a richer description than the one given initially, and it was the implications of this kind of outlook for accompanying young adults, in particular, who are trying to gain clarity about their own call, that was taken forward into the rest of the group work. It was possible in the time available to reflect together on three further aspects of vocational discernment.

The first was the specifically ecclesial aspect of this process. Dioceses and religious orders naturally have an interest in screening those who express an interest in joining them, and in providing appropriate accompaniment for the period (which may well last for a year or more) during which such testing is being carried out. Information is given about what is involved in the way of life being considered, and probably



some experience of it, in so far as this is possible from the outside. Such testing is intended to result in a decision, that this is, or is not, a way of life that the young person involved is likely to be able to live fruitfully.

Even in these rather specific circumstances, it is normally helpful to invite young adults trying to reach a decision, first of all, to let go of the decision itself and to focus on further developing their individual relationship with God. Usually this means that when, later on, they return to the decision, they discover that the landscape within which it is being made has changed. The relationship between the kind of discernment that is involved in these particular cases, and that which applies to all Christians reflecting upon their call from God, was touched upon as the workshop progressed.

The second aspect looked at here was the experience of young adults themselves as they attempt to discern God's call. My impressions here are necessarily anecdotal, but are nevertheless derived from listening to a large number of such people whom I have accompanied. Initially, as with most people in the Church, they tend to think that the term 'vocation' is restricted to priesthood or religious life. Once they look beyond this, there is a danger of paralysis brought about by the overwhelming range of choices on offer: this kind of paralysis has been studied in cases where shoppers in supermarkets find themselves unable to decide between, for example, the dozens of different kinds of jam on offer!<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Nicolas Standaert, 'What Ignatius Did Not Know about Making Decisions', *The Way*, 53/3 (July 2014), 32–55.

There is a danger of encouraging an outlook of perpetual discernment that never reaches a firm decision.

Discernment can be significantly affected, and perhaps even distorted, by a desire to escape from the loneliness that many experience. Any vocations guide also needs some awareness of mental health issues that may present themselves. More positively, many today are seeking a sense of belonging and community, and may be drawn to places where this can be found. Finally there can be a certain polarisation over the question of what is most important in a life of faithfulness to God, setting prayer, theology and the sacraments against social justice, climate change and acts of service.

The third aspect, emerging from the earlier two, looked more closely at the roles and responsibilities of vocation guides, and how they relate to those of more general spiritual directors. This raised the broader question of how vocational discernment relates to the allied fields of evangelization, catechesis and formation. Meeting in groups with others considering a range of vocational possibilities can be an enriching experience here, for example. It can also be seen as part of the call of every Christian to nurture a sense of vocation in others. A question of how a vocation might be thought to change over the course of a lifetime was also briefly considered.

The topic of vocational discernment is a wide one, and a relatively short workshop could only touch upon some of the main aspects of it. Nevertheless, participants went away with tools enabling them to reflect further upon their own present and future experience of engaging in such work, and a framework against which these reflections could be situated. The ideas presented in the other papers collected in this issue of *The Way* can usefully feed into this process.

**Ruth Holgate** is a lay Jesuit Associate, currently working to develop the spirituality dimension of the new London Jesuit Centre.

# ACCOMPANYING THE YOUNG IN THEIR DEVELOPMENT

*David Cabrera*

ONE OF THE DISTINCTIVE THINGS about human beings when they are young is that they cannot be themselves without entering into relationship with others. Being a person is achieved when one lives in dialogue. The 'I' comes into being as related to a 'you'. And that relationship is essential where being related to God is concerned. Faith happens when there is a free response to the initiative of God. Life on one's own is impossible, as it leads to loneliness. Faith impels us to an exercise in relationship: a mystery of this calibre cannot be lived alone.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, progress along the path of spiritual growth needs companionship. Any young person wanting to live a life of faith 'refuses to live from an impersonal, generic form of religiosity'.<sup>2</sup> He or she is seeking a more authentic path, one that is much more personal, more convinced of what is fundamental, more rooted in reality.

Early in the first Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul describes how he began his missionary work with that community, and he gives a glimpse into the depth of how he viewed his mission:

... like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us. (1 Thessalonians 2: 7–8)

To accompany the young is a real ministry. The good news that comes from God has to be transmitted with the art of companionship, and so with great goodness and affection. But it is also through one's own way of life that one must communicate.

This article first appeared in Spanish, in *Manresa*, 91/1 (January–March 2019), 55–66. We are grateful to the editors for permission to publish a translation.

<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 166.

<sup>2</sup> Mihály Szentmártoni, *Manual de psicología pastoral* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 2003), 78.



To accompany young people requires the complete involvement of the person. One has to convert oneself into an authentic witness of faith and of life, able to communicate a God who inspires and attracts. The affection that then arises establishes a link capable of sustaining the discernment needed for the process of development that the young are undergoing. Without that affection, the relationship cannot be maintained. But, at the same time, it has to be an item in the 'particular Examen' of the one who is accompanying. St Ignatius insists on the need to take care that affections are not disordered. In fact, disordered affections are part of the deceits that can occur in companionship. Excessive attachment between a young person and the one who accompanies eventually becomes a hindrance to discernment, and, despite the good relationship between that person and God, hampers due attention, thoughts and decisions.<sup>3</sup>

Any spiritual companionship must be essentially a religious undertaking. All too easily the danger arises of becoming involved in daily matters and the conflicts that occur, leaving to one side the work of *grace*. It is Our Lord who is by our side. It is essential that the one who accompanies understands that it is primarily God who is the companion of the young. A key factor is that no matter how much companions may do and no matter how fully the young people may live, the real miracles are the work of God.

In our pastoral work with the young, we have noticed that spiritual factors are not always obvious, even if ideally they should be present. Our work is with the real life of youngsters and with the developments that we see taking place. It is clear to us that discernment has a useful, indeed necessary, function. Since we have been invited to reflect on what companionship of the young means today and on the reality of today's youth, we here offer three points to consider:

1. Discernment takes place in the midst of today's reality, not that of another epoch.
2. The decisions that one accompanies are made by the young themselves.
3. To accompany the young is a grace. Our hope is that this will allow us to deepen our appreciation of this ecclesial ministry.

<sup>3</sup> See Luís M. García Domínguez, 'Afectos en desorden. Los varios autoengaños en virtud', *Frontera Hegian*, 24 (1999), 37–39.

### ***1. Discerning Where Young People Are Today***

Discernment, whether involving the old or the young, always presumes that there will be a process. No one can discern in a short time: instead, one needs to consider with serenity ‘the various motions which are caused in the soul’ (Exx 313). Among the various meanings that the word *process* brings to mind where Ignatian discernment is concerned there is the notion of constant forward movement, carried out over time and requiring a series of phases. Process is included in that forward movement which is part of the exercise of growth.

Young people today live out their development in the midst of a reality which is very different from that of former times. It is not our intention to outline here a sociology of the lived experiences of the young. All that we want to do is to present some ideas that can help in the use of discernment as one accompanies young people.

It is obvious that societies change; but God does not change. It is our way of perceiving and feeling God, of answering God’s calls, that changes. This becomes clear in Isaiah:

The Lord ... your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it’. (Isaiah 30:21–21)

God continues to arouse spiritual questions in the young of today. To accompany them in the midst of those uncertainties is to help them to hear, feel and respond.

In order to deepen our knowledge of the young people we accompany it will be a help to recall here what is known about ‘spiritual intelligence’. Intelligence, as is well known, is of multiple sorts. Usually it has something to do with a person’s capacity to find the right alternative that will allow solution to some question or problem. It covers, therefore, the ability to work out, assimilate and understand information so that it can be best used when searching for an answer.

Psychology has helped us to understand better this dimension of our intelligence. The New York psychologist Howard Gardner has worked on the model of multiple intelligence, investigating a combination of specific capacities that vary in their level of generality. Thus, intelligence is seen to be composed of various elements or levels. Consequently, it can cover both the cognitive and the emotional. Not only is the affective emotional world involved, but also for this area the body, the senses, the

instincts and the feelings have an essential part.<sup>4</sup> The level of spiritual intelligence has more to do with well-being, the feeling for life, and the notion of vocation (in the wide sense of the term): basically, with what it means to be a person. This intelligence is completely human, it furnishes one with a holistic vision of the deepest reality, capable of giving meaning to the context. It can transcend, pass beyond the biological, the physical and the social, beyond the corporeal and the emotional.

The Ignatian way to educate 'spiritual intelligence' is by means of contemplation. A young person who practises the exercise of contemplation can increase his or her capacity to consider the surrounding reality from a transcendental point of view. To accompany someone along this route, even if it is not quite a school of prayer, offers the guiding hand that best facilitates Ignatian prayer. In this way, life can be given a spiritual sense. A capacity to transcend comes into action, a capacity to live in harmony with the gospel. Studies have shown that to develop this dimension of intelligence makes people more joyful, no matter what accidental circumstances may be suffocating their happiness.<sup>5</sup>

In our view of companionship it is essential to keep the dimension of spiritual intelligence in mind. This is a holistic dimension which encompasses everything and allow us to see the entire person. It is important not to omit any of the factors that intervene in life. Our task whenever we accompany the young is to help them to be aware of the self, of the conditions in which they are living, of the reality of life, of values, of personal characteristics, and so on. By accompanying, one can help them to have self-knowledge, to be open to the transcendental dimension of life: open to God, and to discovering the dream that God has for them.

The aim of this spiritual companionship is to assist young people in the following of Jesus. Indeed, the task will be to make it easier for them to become like Jesus. This comes about not by way of intelligence or particular values, but by way of 'internal knowledge'. No doubt, the powers of this world make personal discernments more difficult. Sin, whether structural or personal, creates a fog in the process which impedes knowledge and learning. To be like Jesus has increasingly become a challenge. Good companionship can provide the school in which to learn.

The first thing to ask oneself when accompanying someone is: who is this person? As we have contact with, speak with, and think about those

<sup>4</sup> For further study of the world of the emotions, see Leslie Greenberg, *Emociones. Una guía interna* (Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 2000). Many works by Leslie Greenberg are available in English. [Trans.]

<sup>5</sup> See Francesc Torralba Roselló, *Inteligencia espiritual* (Barcelona: Plataforma Editorial, 2010), 12–19.

who share their lives with us, we become aware of certain factors. To a great extent, they challenge us; each has to be seen in a specific vital and ministerial context.<sup>6</sup> There are three possible scenarios:

1. The society in which we are living is not the Catholic society that used to exist. Secularism is ever more present around us, and thus the young people whom we happen to meet in the course of life are not those of former times. Moreover, in the past there was the figure of the 'spiritual father', who acted as the pivot around whom spiritual conversation and direction turned. But today such a figure has almost disappeared or no longer exists. The theologian Karl Rahner repeatedly referred to what the Christian of the twentieth century should be: 'a mystic' was his expression. We might say, 'a person of experience'. By this we mean that to accompany the young we have to be aware of the process of their experience. We have to know what it is that the young, both those who come under our pastoral care and those outside it, are living through. This is especially true in relation to the varied development of spiritual growth: we must be aware that it is not only the divine but also the human in the whole of life.

We have to make sure that all our creativity and the measures we adopt are aids to authentic experiences of faith. These may happen elsewhere, not only in the context of pastoral encounters with teenagers or young adults. There are many ways of provoking interest, of touching hearts and souls. Personal meetings have become less common. Our culture is one of the mobile phone and WhatsApp: the instant moment, even if it is taking place far away. Today there is no need to see one another in order to say something. But in the background, the crucial need remains: to echo the spiritual



© Tuce @ Unsplash

<sup>6</sup> These ideas are taken from *Un tesoro a desenterrar. Algunas sugerencias para la Pastoral Vocacional* (Madrid: Spanish Province of Jesuits, 2005), 18–21.

call to care for what is within, and to make clear that inside the person things are happening that are of vital importance to life.<sup>7</sup> We accompany the possibility that life is being lived according to the Spirit of Jesus and his gospel. We *provoke*, hoping to accompany the possibility of a personal dimension with the God of Jesus Christ. In other words, there exists a special way—based on the Spirit and the gospel—of facing up to reality, and of having an effect on the real history of our world.

What sort of spirituality are we inculcating as we accompany the young? It should be one that transfigures ordinary life, not a superficial and distant one, but one that sets them free (so that they can think and feel for themselves) and allows them to look at things in a contemplative way, able to discover how the world and everything within it are full of the presence of God and speak of God. It should bring them into communion with themselves and with others. It should be joyful, capable of healthy self-realisation and ready to accept personal responsibility. Ignatian spirituality and, in particular, the Spiritual Exercises, provide those who accompany the young with the tools needed to bring help of this sort. The Ignatian exercises rely on a dynamic movement that descends into the depths of the person.

2. Today's society is a society of well-being. Materialism and wealth have assumed a privileged place in our personal lives. Power for us is to be found in what things are worth. We have moved further and further away from the suggestion Ignatius is making in the Principle and Foundation (Exx 23), that all things on the face of the earth are given by God to help carry out the salvific work of God in us. The things of this world belong to God, and are granted to us by God's will and goodness. The dynamic relationship of *in so far as* (*tantum ... quantum*) and of *indifference* has become today practically impossible. The task now is how to feel well. The Ignatian verbs 'praise, reverence, and serve', which are intended to take us out of ourselves and place us in God have lost meaning. The only valid 'end for which' is my own personal well-being. Young people today live with this burdensome reality.

What, then, are we trying to do as we accompany them? Is it some sort of *personal training*, for the external or for the internal? Clearly, what has to be given preference is whatever helps the interior being.<sup>8</sup> But it

<sup>7</sup> In this way, accompaniment is a constant learning process, so that one can foster what is happening inside each particular young person: on this see A. García Rubio, 'Aprender a cultivar la interioridad', in *14 aprendizajes vitales*, edited by Carlos Alemany, 4th edn (Bilbao: Desclée de Brouwer, 1998), 123–142.

<sup>8</sup> Useful in this regard is *Misión Joven. Revista de Pastoral Juvenil*, 56, 'Habitar la interioridad' (June 2016).

would be short-sighted to limit our task to the interior without paying attention to the way in which what is felt within finds expression in the real world. When we talk with the young, we have to be aware of this double movement: on the one hand we must be able to recognise and find words for what is going on inside, for the feelings and the movements. Here we are contributing to their sense of *I feel right*. On the other hand, we should be able to help the feelings come to the surface, to find expression in actions. We have to help the young both to find words for what they are feeling and to cope with it in action. The true art of discernment requires this exercise of accompaniment.

The aim of the Ignatian Exercises is to enable the exercitant, by means of the experience of the Spirit, to focus more on being united with God, and to make an election.<sup>9</sup> Direction is not what is taking place, but companionship. In the case of young people today, one accompanies them in order to help their closer union with God and, thanks to that intimate union, to assist them, in making decisions for life. All too often, the tendency is to treat reality in too spiritual a fashion and to adopt lofty horizons that seem out of reach. But if the person accompanying helps them to come down to earth along with the Spirit of Jesus, they can find accessible means by which to feel happy and to find satisfaction. Obviously, the more the young are united with God, the better will be their moral life in seeking good and avoiding evil. By the choice of what is good, they find their identity and achieve human fullness by realising the vocation God offers them.

***Realising the  
vocation God  
offers them***

3. Our society is one that is anxious to be happy. In today's world, everyone craves happiness. Parents want their children to find authentic happiness. Our young people, and we ourselves, seek only to be happy. This is something innate to human nature. But we are all aware that happiness is not easy to achieve.<sup>10</sup> The usual attitude is to cling to the belief that all that matters is enjoyment, and that happiness depends on pleasure. Nevertheless, we know that that is not always the case. On many occasions, a sharp setback can bring great joy—one that is not euphoric, but real, full of peace and humble. As we accompany the

<sup>9</sup> For more on this topic, see Luís M. García Domínguez, *La entrevista en los Ejercicios Espirituales* (Bilbao and Santander: Mensajero and Sal Terrae, 2010), 140–144.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (New York: Free Press, 2002): to focus one's life on the gifts that one possesses and on the positive evaluation that lies hidden in the events of one's life. Along the same lines, see Alfonso Salgado, 'Fortalezas personales y la vida con sentido: aportaciones para el acompañamiento', *Manresa*, 88/4 (October–December 2016), 329–340.



young, are we not called to prompt those experiences that will be of help in confronting reality from different points of view, those not linked to pleasure, and thus help them discover that joy is possible? The personal call made to each young person can, with the help of the one who accompanies, be made clear. Once again, the difficult art of discernment is needed. Both the accompanied and the companion need to be alert to the promptings of the Spirit in order to find what can be most helpful. But simply being alongside may well be the factor that enables decisions to be made in the light of the search for God and for happiness.

Companionship then becomes a school for developing the personality. Our young people today are orientated more than ever towards the global; they belong to a plurality, which is often without limits. Hence the Ignatian question is increasingly relevant: *Where would you have me go?* When we talk with young people, that question should be frequently put to them. All too often, the group, the 'others', the plural, become too predominant. But in the intimacy of companionship the invitation can be offered to make one's life, one's options, even one's faith, more personal.

## **2. Accompanying Decisions**

How many agents are involved when accompanying the young? There are more than two: apart from the young person and the companion, faith comes into the picture. God is present working in both. This truth allows us to formulate a statement regarding what we believe about the spiritual companionship of the young: *it consists in a meeting with someone in ordinary life which, as a relationship, is notable for its character of complete spiritual assistance, that enables a young person to grow in the freedom to find God in his or her life and to become involved in the Kingdom.* Basically, it is a



meeting which serves to mediate in the acceptance of life, accompanies life and takes place in the context of daily living.<sup>11</sup> There is an important feature here: one is trying to help and accompany the young person in the process of finding a vocation (in the widest possible sense), that is, helping that person to find his or her *place in the world* within a context of faith, whether from the ecclesial, social, professional or human point of view.

For this to be possible, two conditions are fundamental: knowing how to welcome and knowing how to listen. Those who accompany must know how to make the young people coming to them feel at home, no matter who they may be—fully themselves and with all their circumstances and real past history. The work of the psychologist Carl Rogers has revealed how this welcome has to be unconditional. One must pay careful attention to what can be seen and heard, because that is how people communicate at a deep level. And one has to know how to *see* those who come, what brings them, how to help them look beyond themselves: how to look at life in the search for faith and how life can be considered from other points of view.

Some elements involved in the art of accompanying the young in taking decisions and that illuminate this essential task can be synthesized as follows:

- The young people being accompanied are going through processes of growth, of finding their vocations and personal identity; our work is to guide and care for that development.
- Faith must be made personal: this involves the image of God, relations with God; and how to help young people discover the project of the Kingdom and the dream of God.
- Somehow the different activities of life—to *possess*, to *be*, to *dream*, to *live*—have to be combined into a whole. The search is for an equilibrium between life and belief, ‘mine’ and ‘yours’, so that one’s vocation can be identified.
- Young people can be helped to overcome failures, limitations and difficulties: to face up to them as part of life instead of denying them; to accept that lack of success in life is not what matters; also, to cope with success. Both success and failure are facts of life that we must learn to accept.

<sup>11</sup> See Lola Arrieta, *Acoger la vida, acompañando la vida. El acompañamiento en la vida cotidiana* (Vitoria: Frontera-Hegian, 2004), 37–47.

- By accompanying the young one fulfils a ministry of the Church; as members of the Church, we can have that function and help others also to grow ecclesially.
- Limits have to be set: we cannot assume duties that are not ours; some distance about our role allows objectivity. It is not a question of being aloof and cold, but we have to know how to be close to someone without falling into the temptation of losing our proper place; it is not for us to take on another's role; care is needed to avoid dependence in the relationship and the overstepping of legal barriers. Our role is to act as witnesses to life so that it can be lived out fully.
- One does not try to indoctrinate or control: all conduct that supposes directing those we accompany has to be avoided; it would limit a person's freedom and become manipulative; thus one must never forestall or pre-empt, never take the place of the Spirit who is active in any particular youngster (no matter how young).
- It is not our duty to please anyone; we are there to give help, as far as we can. Someone who accompanies needs to have a certain gift for dealing with the young: in touch, friendly and accessible. But often the one who accompanies will need to say things that are not agreeable to hear, to act as loudspeaker for that part of the self that we are least accustomed to hear. At other times, it will be for us to animate, support and encourage progress along the path of faith and of life. Clearly, our purpose is not just to be agreeable, so that the young person will turn up to another meeting, but rather to be an instrument of help.<sup>12</sup>
- To accompany someone is not easy; it can be complex! One should not lose heart. Basically, this is an art. It demands much from us—both time and a complete trust in God. At moments when things become difficult, one has to know how to call on God's assistance. Where we are weak, God's power knows no limits.

### **3. The Grace to Accompany**

Those of us who undertake this work are not paragons. We are agents in a spiritual task which needs the grace of God so that we can fulfil the

<sup>12</sup> See José Carlos Bermejo and Pere Ribot, *La relación de ayuda en el ámbito educativo. Material de trabajo* (Santander: Sal Terrae and Centro de Humanización de la Salud, 2007).

mission set us.<sup>13</sup> We turn to the Word of God to pick out some suggestions that provide *gospel advice for those who accompany the young*:<sup>14</sup>

- ‘All who are led by the Spirit of God’ (Romans 8:14). No one can take the place of God and God’s Spirit. As believers, we believe that the Spirit is active and that we are moved by the Spirit, so much so that we are brought to the fullness of life. Thus, we are witnesses to a dynamism inspired by the Spirit.
- ‘But you are not to be called rabbi .... And call no one on earth your father .... Nor are you to be called instructors’ (Matthew 23:8–10). All these titles imply the risk of appropriating control, as is particularly easy where the consciences and intimate feelings of young people are concerned. We have to be constantly reminding ourselves that there is only one Father, who is in heaven, and only one Lord, Jesus Christ.
- ‘He must increase but I must decrease’ (John 3:30). The active presence of someone who accompanies, especially when frequent, decreases in importance, eventually to the point of disappearing. The purpose of this spiritual and pastoral companionship is to ensure that the figure of Christ may grow in relevance, ‘until Christ is formed in you’ (Galatians 4:19), and the young person may gain in sensitivity to him. Even if, in fact, we do not disappear completely, our limitations and our gifts, our momentary presence, no longer have a part to play.
- ‘Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground’ (Exodus 3:5). As happened to Moses, confronted by the burning bush, the adventure we have undertaken is a sacred one: God is present and the Spirit of God is burning with force. Old prejudices and *a priori* judgments have to be abandoned. Simply to be ourselves is the best we can do as we accompany someone. We have to advance with Ignatian dynamism, held in tension with the constant need to direct all that we own towards God and the Kingdom.

<sup>13</sup> For what follows, see Darío Mollá, *De acompañante a acompañante. Una espiritualidad para el encuentro* (Madrid: Narcea, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> See Oscar Alonso Peno, *Acompañar. El acompañamiento pastoral a los adolescentes en la escuela*, 3rd edn (Madrid: PPC, 2008), 120–131.

- ‘Treasure in clay jars’ (2 Corinthians 4:7). Those who devote themselves to walking with the young have to be convinced of these wise words: the faith of each young person is a ‘treasure’. But we are as fragile as ‘clay jars’, with all the weaknesses of clay that can crack and break. Great care is needed!

In the light of all this, careful preparation is needed on our part. We must take care of our own spiritual spaces. It is important that we are aware of our own personal spiritual experience; then there can be quality and security as we accompany. This is an interior wealth that each of us can build up: things such as personal prayer, and ourselves having

***The grace of  
companionship  
as part of the  
mission of  
the Church***

those who can guide us, are essential. And in addition to the care we take in this regard, we have to be, above all, human, sensitive, understanding, knowing how to form true relationships in a mature fashion, persons who are able to discern. When we gain in the technique and practice of discernment, we become more able to be companions of the young. It is important to learn the rules of Ignatian discernment, the tricks of the bad spirit and the action of the good spirit. Anyone who accompanies is of course a person who accepts the responsibility of the gospel and understands life in today’s society. He or she embodies the grace of companionship as part of the mission of the Church.

***‘Allow the Creator to Deal Immediately with the Creature’ (Exx 15)***

To accompany the young is always a challenge. They need people who will walk with them and be witnesses in their difficult task ‘seeking and finding God’s will in the ordering of our life for the salvation of our soul’ (Exx 1). An exercise of constant conversion is needed. This is well expressed in the epilogue of *Wisdom of a Poor Man*:

To bring the Gospel to someone is to say, ‘You also are beloved of God in Christ Jesus Our Lord!’, and not only to say this, but really to believe it, and not only to believe but to behave towards that person in such a way that he or she feels and discovers that there is something of being saved in him- or herself, something greater and more noble than she had suspected .... And we can do this only by offering our friendship, a friendship that is real, without self-interest, not condescending but founded on deep trust and esteem. We have to approach people; but in our approach we must, above all, not give the impression that we are some new sort of competitor. While in their midst, we have to be peaceful witnesses of God the Father, bereft of

avarice and dislike, capable of being really their friends. It is for our friendship that they are longing, a friendship which will make them feel that they are beloved of God and saved in Jesus Christ.<sup>15</sup>

Any accompaniment on our part should not interfere with the action of God within the person by whose side we are walking. We know how St Ignatius insisted in the Annotations that one should ‘allow the Creator to deal immediately with the creature’. That ‘immediate’ action is not a problem for the person who, paying attention to the Spirit, is not impeded by obstacles in carrying out the will of God. We can easily fall into the temptation of trying to influence the young with our own baggage of experience. We may want to help them to avoid difficulties and awkwardness in the following of Christ. But a young person—a ‘creature’ of God—has to live that in a personal way. The task of the helper is consequently all the more complex. We may have to put up with the frustration of seeing someone making mistakes and yet hold back. Otherwise, we would break with the pact of freedom that that has to take precedence in any relationship of companionship. To allow God to communicate is to allow the transformation of the hearts of the young, ‘to help them in the pursuit of the end for which they are created’ (Exx 23).

*David Cabrera SJ* is a Jesuit priest based in Madrid. He is a specialist in humanist therapy (psychodiagnostics) and does pastoral work especially with children and adolescents.

*translated by Joseph A. Munitiz SJ*

<sup>15</sup> Eloi Leclerc, *Sabiduría de un pobre* (Madrid: Marova, 1987, 164. There is a published English translation: *The Wisdom of the Poor One of Assisi*, translated by Marie-Louise Johnson (Pasadena: Hope, 1991).

# St BEUNO'S



## JESUIT SPIRITUALITY CENTRE

A place of peace, prayer and beauty in North Wales

*Away in the loveable west,  
On a pastoral forehead of Wales,  
I was under a roof here, I was at rest*

Gerard Manley Hopkins, Jesuit poet

St Beunos is a Jesuit retreat house offering the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, silent individually guided retreats and various themed retreats. We also provide courses and training in spiritual accompaniment.

For the full programme of retreats and courses, see [www.beunos.com](http://www.beunos.com)

Contact: The Secretary, St Beuno's, St Asaph,  
Denbighshire, N. Wales, LL17 0AS

Tel: +44 (0)1745 583444

[secretary@beunos.com](mailto:secretary@beunos.com)

# SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

## The Horizon That Is God

Mark Rotsaert

**D**ISCERNMENT IS A HUMAN CAPACITY as old as humanity itself. From the beginning, men and women have had to take decisions, to make choices: what have I got to do? Or, what should I do? What is good; what is bad? To take good decisions or to make good choices men and women rely on their experience: what went well; what did not? They rely also on their conscience, that most intimate centre of a human being. Discernment is a fundamental human capacity—then and now. And to discern, human beings use that capacity to reflect on their experience.

From the very beginning of the Church, Christian teachers and theologians have spoken about ‘spiritual discernment’, emphasizing that discernment has something to do with the Spirit: the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. In using our capacity to discern, they believe that God’s Spirit is our best guide in taking decisions about life. Spiritual discernment is our human capacity to discern illuminated by God’s Spirit. The light that illuminates our discernment comes from the Spirit. It is a gift given by God. It is God’s work in us; it is not ‘our’ work. But how can we know that it is really God’s Spirit who is guiding us? An answer can be found in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola.

### ***A Spiritual Journey***

Ignatius’ specific contribution to the tradition of spiritual discernment is the ‘discernment of the spirits’ and the ‘Rules’ that he proposes to help with this. The Spiritual Exercises are a spiritual and prayerful journey, a process that leads to a decision, an *election* about the future of our life.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this spiritual journey is to find out—gradually—what God’s desire for our life is, so that God’s desire can become our own desire.

<sup>1</sup> Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises: Text and Commentary* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2008). See ‘Rules for Discernment’, 205–237. I am using Ivens’s translation, in *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola* (Leominster: Gracewing 2004).



The journey starts as a path to inner freedom. A first step will be to discover, in prayerful meditation, how God's mercy is always greater than our sins, than our infidelity. Retreatants, touched by God's mercy, then feel a desire to be an answer to God's love themselves. But how should they proceed? Ignatius proposes that they should contemplate the life of Jesus. This contemplation, day by day, will help the retreatants to discover how their lives can be more and more in tune with Jesus Christ, the image of God's love. The contemplation of Jesus' life in the Gospels—to see the persons involved, to hear what they say, to see what they are doing—is at the heart of this prayerful journey.

It is important during this day-by-day contemplation to become aware of the *inner movements* that the contemplation is provoking in our hearts. Normally, retreatants will not remain unaffected by contemplating Jesus' life. So, what touched them in contemplating a particular event? And how did it touch them? Did they experience peace, joy, trust, harmony? Or did they experience disturbance, darkness, disquiet? Ignatius calls the positive inner movements *consolation* (Exx 316) and the negative ones *desolation* (Exx 317).

We arrive here at the centre of Ignatius' vision of spiritual discernment. He proposes that retreatants make a review (Exx 77, 62, 118) of each contemplation, noting what happened during the contemplation, especially what the inner movements were. This review of the inner movements is essential in Ignatius' pedagogy. It will help retreatants to discern how God was speaking to them during their prayer. Without inner movements there is no discernment in the Spiritual Exercises: are the inner movements coming from the good spirit or the bad spirit?

Before exploring the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, it makes sense to ask ourselves what Ignatius means by the good and the bad spirit. When, at the beginning of the book of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius presents the General Examen of Conscience, he writes:

I presuppose that there are three kinds of thought processes in me, one sort which are properly mine and arise simply from liberty and will, and two other sorts which come from outside, one from the good spirit and the other from the bad (Exx 32).

In the anthropology of Ignatius' time, thoughts coming from outside were considered as coming from 'spirits', having intelligence and will but no body. These spirits look to communicate with human persons, suggesting ideas or images that touch them in their inner selves. Such beings may be called 'spirits' or 'angels', and they may be good or bad.

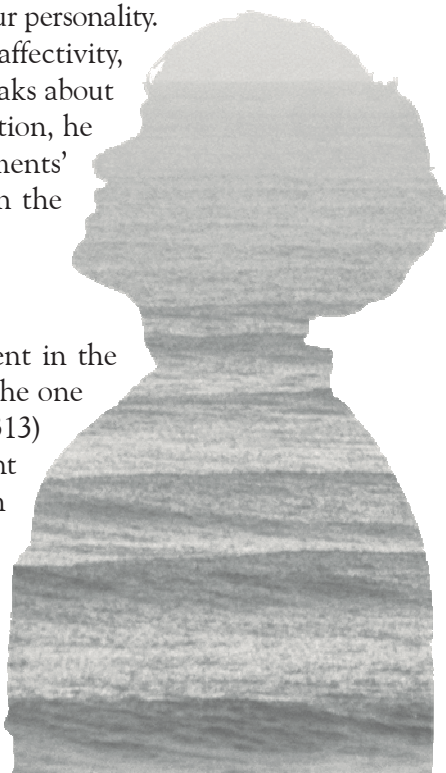
Modern psychology has a different approach.<sup>2</sup> It accepts that there are some thoughts that are really my thoughts, and there are other thoughts about which I wonder where they are coming from. They are not from outside (as in the anthropology of Ignatius' time) but from my unconscious. There are, thus, thoughts and images which affect me and which come from my intellect and will, and there are thoughts and ideas that I undergo and which could become mine if I assent. These can be good or bad. 'Inner movements' means, in Ignatius' terminology, being affected in our inner self.

Are 'inner movements' movements of our human affectivity? When we look at the sea we will see waves; they can be very high and strong, they can be more moderate, and sometimes the sea can be quite flat with very small waves. These waves nevertheless say nothing about the current in the depths of the ocean. The 'inner movements' Ignatius speaks about are not what we experience immediately when we have strong emotions; they are in the depths of our personality.

Certainly, they are a part of our human affectivity, but they are more than that. If Ignatius speaks about 'spiritual' consolation and 'spiritual' desolation, he wants to underline that these 'inner movements' are a part of our spiritual life, of our life in the Spirit.

### **Rules for Spiritual Discernment**

There are two sets of Rules for Discernment in the book of the *Spiritual Exercises*, written for the one who gives the Exercises. After the title (Exx 313) and the general framework—is the retreatant a person who is going from one deadly sin to another (Exx 314), or is he or she going from good to better (Exx 315)?—there follows the description of consolation (Exx 316) and desolation (Exx 317). These paragraphs (Exx 314, 315, 316, 317) form an introduction both to the Rules for the First Week and those for the Second Week.



<sup>2</sup> See Adrien Demoustier, *Les Exercices Spirituels de S. Ignace de Loyola. Lecture et pratique d'un texte* (Paris: Facultés J su tes, 2006), 64–68.

Then follow ten rules (Exx 318–327) that are most suitable for the First Week, or for whoever is at the beginning of the spiritual journey. Nearly all these ten rules concern desolation. Why? Because at the beginning of the spiritual journey of the Exercises—meditating on their sins and infidelity—desolation could lead retreatants more easily away from the way they want to go in following Jesus. The purpose of these ten rules is to help the retreatants manage the movements of desolation well, so that they can resist them in the future. The aim of this first set of rules is not so much to discern where the desolation is coming from, but to learn how to manage it well.

**To discern if  
a consolation  
is a true  
consolation**

The second set (Exx 328–336) is composed of eight rules, all concerning consolation, and is more appropriate for the next stage of the spiritual journey. Continuing this journey, contemplating the life of Jesus, the danger is no longer being tempted by desolation—retreatants know how to manage that—but being deceived by false consolation. The aim of this second set of rules is thus to discern if a consolation is a true consolation—a movement caused by God or God’s good angel—or a pseudo-consolation caused by a bad angel, ‘an angel who takes the form of an angel of light’ (Exx 332).

Let us go deeper into these rules for spiritual discernment. The title at the beginning of the first set says:

Rules by which to perceive [*sentir*] and understand [*conocer*] to some extent the various movements produced in the soul. The good that they may be accepted, and the bad, that they may be rejected. Rules more suitable for the First Week. (Exx 313)

*Sentir* and *conocer*: it looks as if *sentir* concerns affectivity and *conocer* the intellect. But things are not as easy as that in Ignatian vocabulary.<sup>3</sup> *Sentir* means here to become aware of what touched me interiorly, of what affected my heart or, in the expression Ignatius uses in this context, to become aware of the ‘inner movements’ I experience.

Michael Ivens translates the famous last sentence of the second Annotation as follows: ‘It is not much knowledge but the inner feeling and relish of things that fills and satisfies the soul’ (Exx 2). The

<sup>3</sup> See Sylvie Robert, *Une Autre Connaissance de Dieu. Le discernement chez Ignace de Loyola* (Paris: Cerf, 1997), 131–173.

Spanish text says: 'No el mucho saber harta y satisface al ánima, mas el sentir y gustar de las cosas internamente'. George Ganss translates it: 'For what fills and satisfies the soul consists, not in knowing much, but in our understanding the realities profoundly and in savouring them interiorly'.<sup>4</sup>

The interiority or inner self of the retreatant is a central concept in the Spiritual Exercises. It appears regularly in the grace for which retreatants should ask at the beginning of a contemplation, for example, during the Second Week: 'To ask for inner knowledge of the Lord' (Exx 104), or in the Contemplation to Attain Love: 'To ask for interior knowledge of all the good I have received' (Exx 233). Interior knowledge is a knowledge that affects the retreatant in his or her innermost self. Affectivity and intellect are thus related to one another.

Let us go back to the title of the first set of Rules for Discernment (Exx 313). Ivens translates the text as: 'Rules by which to perceive and understand to some extent the various movements produced in the soul ....' Inner movements are experienced at the level of our deeper affectivity, and to *perceive* those inner movements is already an exercise of the intellect.<sup>5</sup> It is to become aware of the inner movements, to become conscious of the movements I experience and to give them a name, to understand them, so that I am able to accept the good inner movements and reject the bad ones.

The Rules will help in this process, which takes place in different stages: the starting point is just the experience of being affected (by this or that aspect of a contemplation of the life of Jesus); a second step is the perception I have of being affected by my contemplation. A third step will be to understand these inner movements by identification: is it consolation or desolation?

Reading the description that Ignatius gives of consolation and desolation, it is important to note where the inner movement is leading us. Reading Exx 316, it appears clearly that consolation leads the retreatant 'to a greater love of God'. Desolation leads to 'a lack of confidence in which one feels oneself to be without hope and without love .... One finds oneself ... as though cut off from one's Creator and Lord.' (Exx 317)

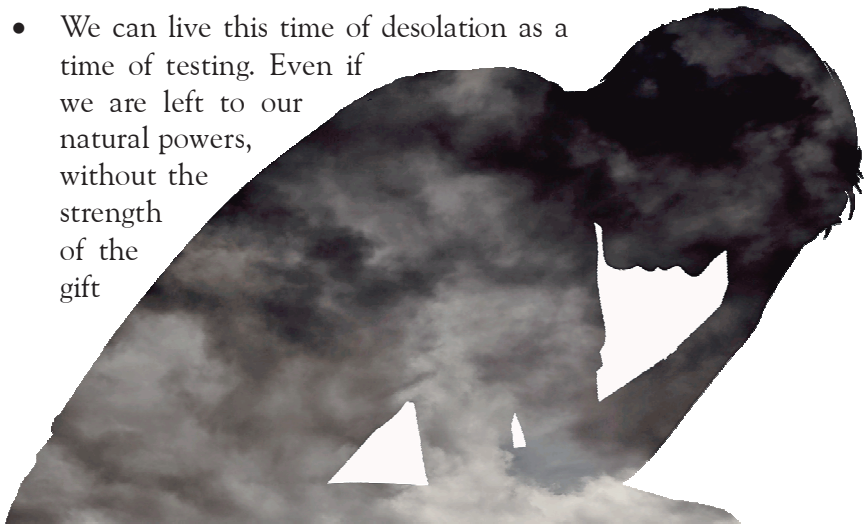
<sup>4</sup> *Autobiography*, nn. 6–10.

<sup>5</sup> Robert, *Autre Connaissance de Dieu*, 131–139.

### *How to Manage Desolation Well*

Can desolation come from God? In a letter of 18 June 1536 to Teresa Rejadell, Ignatius writes: 'I shall speak, though briefly, about two lessons that the Lord is accustomed to give, or at least permit (he gives the one and permits the other)'.<sup>6</sup> But even if God permits desolation itself, persons in desolation should keep in mind how much they can do if they draw strength from their Creator and Lord, having the grace sufficient to resist every enemy, as Ignatius says in the eleventh rule of the first set (Exx 324). How, then, can we manage desolation well?

- In a time of desolation we should not make changes to former decisions, because in desolation we mostly hear from the bad spirit, which will give us bad counsel. Nevertheless, we can orientate ourselves in the opposite direction from the way the desolation is leading us. For example, if the desolation is isolating us within ourselves, we can make little steps towards doing something for others. In doing so we make it possible for a positive dynamic to emerge and prepare the way for consolation. During a time of desolation we should not remain passive; we have to act, even if it is only by these small steps. We can transform a time of desolation into a time of spiritual growth. (Exx 318–319)
- We can live this time of desolation as a time of testing. Even if we are left to our natural powers, without the strength of the gift



<sup>6</sup> Ignatius to Teresa Rejadell, 18 June 1536, in *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, translated by Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (London: Penguin, 1996)

of consolation—nevertheless there will be always be sufficient grace for eternal salvation. (Exx 320)

- It can be a time to exercise our patience. (Exx 321)
- It can become a test for our generosity. How generous am I in God's service when I have no consolation? (Exx 322)
- It can help us to become modest. We are not the ones who give consolation. (Exx 322)
- The cause of the desolation can be found in ourselves, when we are lukewarm, lazy or careless in the practices of the spiritual life. (Exx 322)
- When we are in consolation we should gather renewed strength for the time of desolation which will come. In a time of consolation we can grow in humility by thinking how little we value ourselves in time of desolation. (Exx 323–324)

Three attitudes can help us to manage temptations.

- When we are tempted, we have to stop the temptation immediately. *Principiis obsta* (resist the beginnings) as the monks in the Middle Ages said.<sup>7</sup> We have to *resist* strongly. Ignatius uses the image of a quarrel between a man and a woman to describe the way of proceeding of the bad spirit who is trying to bring a person into temptation. It is the only place in the *Spiritual Exercises* where the bad spirit is compared to a woman! (Exx 325)
- The second attitude is to *be open* with a person we trust: to speak about the temptation. The image here is that of a woman with a false lover. When the woman reveals the bad intentions of the lover to someone else, the lover's plan will not succeed. (Exx 326)
- The third attitude is to *be vigilant*. It is important to know our weak points, our limits. But it is not enough to know them; we have to learn to accept them and to respect them. The image here is that of a military leader who inspects the weak points of the enemy's fortifications, so that he knows where to attack them. (Exx 327)

<sup>7</sup> Compare Ovid, *Remedia amoris*, l. 91.

### *Consolation Comes First*

It is not just by chance that the description of consolation (Exx 316) precedes the description of desolation (Exx 317). Consolation comes first; it is much more important than desolation. Consolation remains always at the horizon.<sup>8</sup> Consolation is a safe guide on our spiritual journey; desolation is not. The description of desolation is not much more than the contrary of the consolation. Only consolation is a guiding star on our spiritual journey. Consolation is a gift from God. It is the way God is speaking to us, the way God communicates God's infinite goodness to us.

We find this same fundamental conviction in the way Ignatius begins and finishes his letters.<sup>9</sup> He begins the letter to Teresa Rejadell already quoted as follows: 'May the grace and love of Christ Our Lord be always in our favour and assist us'. The letter finishes with: 'I end by praying the most Holy Trinity to give us, through their infinite and supreme goodness, the fullness of grace, so that we may feel their most holy will and fulfil it completely' (this is the same for 992 of his 6,815 letters!).

### *Rules for a More Advanced Discernment of Spirits*

The Rules for the First Week helped us to manage desolation. Used well, they made us more resistant, more humble, more patient, more vigilant in the spiritual combat that is ours. During the First Week we have to fight against desolation. By contrast, consolation has to be accepted; we never need to resist consolation.<sup>10</sup> In the Second Week, we do not have to fight against the false consolation, but against the thoughts coming from the bad angel.

Having experienced God's mercy at the end of the First Week, retreatants then feel a deep desire to make their lives more in tune with Jesus Christ, the image of God's mercy. They will now contemplate the life of Jesus, to find out how to do this. The meditation on the Two Standards teaches them that the bad spirit is still there, now ready to deceive them rather than bring desolation. They have to know that the bad spirit can 'assume the form of an angel of light'. The eight Rules Ignatius proposes now will help the retreatants to fix their vision on God.

<sup>8</sup> Robert, *Autre Connaissance de Dieu*, 149.

<sup>9</sup> Robert, *Autre Connaissance de Dieu*, 151.

<sup>10</sup> Robert, *Autre Connaissance de Dieu*, 149.



- If the description of consolation (Exx 316) emphasizes the *aim* of consolation—to grow in love of God, our Creator and Lord—in the second set of Rules the emphasis is much more on its origin: where is the consolation coming from? The answer is clear: consolation is given by God, or by God's angel, the good angel. So, it is a circular movement: consolation is coming from God and it leads us to God. This means that each consolation is deepening our relationship with God. Consolation is never given just for itself, the aim of each consolation is to deepen our relationship with God, our Creator and Lord, so that our life can be directed to God's glory and to the common good. (Exx 329)
- God is sovereign. God can give us consolation without any cause, just in order to communicate God's love. Ignatius explains 'without cause': 'I mean without any previous perception [*sentimiento*] or understanding [*conocimiento*] of some object due to which such consolation could come about'. Here again 'perception' and 'understanding' derive from the verbs *sentir* and *conocer*. That a consolation without cause is a real possibility is a fundamental conviction of Ignatius. It is, for example, what happens during 'the first time of making a sound and good election. When God our Lord so moves and attracts the will that without doubting or being able to doubt, the faithful soul follows what is shown.' (Exx 175) If experience teaches us that this first time is not the normal way for making an election, it is nevertheless not exceptional. (Exx 330)
- Analysing consolation without cause more precisely, Ignatius warns retreatants in the Eighth Rule:

When consolation is without cause, even though there is no deception in it (since as has been said, it comes solely from God our Lord), nevertheless the spiritual person to whom God gives this consolation must scrutinize the experience carefully and attentively, so as to distinguish the precise time of the actual consolation from the period following it, during which the soul is still aglow and favoured with the benefits and after-effects of the consolation now passed.

Even if the consolation was pure grace, it could be possible for the retreatant to make a decision in the period immediately after this grace, thinking that the decision is given directly by God. So, we have to examine well, says Ignatius, what is the grace given by God, and what is the result of my own thoughts and decisions. (Exx 336)

- According to the Third Rule: ‘When there is a cause, consolation can be given by the good or the bad angel, but these give consolation for opposite purposes’. Therefore it will be necessary to discern if the consolation is a true consolation, coming from the good angel, or if it is a false consolation, coming from the bad angel. (Exx 331)

The next three rules (Exx 332, 333, 334) propose a way of proceeding to find out if a consolation is coming from the bad spirit and so to discover whether it is a false consolation.

- First of all, it is important to know that the bad angel, when he chooses to deceive, ‘assumes the form of an angel of light’. He enters through the door of the devout soul, to bring it ‘little by little’ to his ‘perverted purposes’. (Exx 332)
- Secondly, it is important to ‘pay close attention to the whole course of our thoughts. If beginning, middle and end are entirely good, this is a sign of the good angel.’ But if the ‘course of our thoughts leads us finally to something bad and makes us weakened, upset or distressed’ it is ‘a clear sign of the bad spirit’. (Exx 333)
- Thirdly, ‘If the bad angel has been recognised by his serpent’s tail’, it is important to ‘retrace the whole sequence of good thoughts he has suggested’, so to discover how ‘little by little he brought us to his depraved intention’. (Exx 334)

Only by experience do we become more sensitive to the way of proceeding of the bad angel. The experience of all our true consolations in the past—the memory of the heart—will help us to discover ever more rapidly when the bad angel is at work.

- The Seventh Rule describes the situation of a person who has learnt much from his or her experience of discerning the bad from the good angel:

With those who go from good to better, the good angel touches the soul gently, lightly, and sweetly, like a drop of water into a sponge ... the good angel comes in quietly, as one would enter one’s own house by an open door.

The one who goes from good to better recognises the good angel with a deep familiarity. Every true consolation deepens that person’s intimacy with God, the Giver of all good. A person who

is familiar—connatural—with God and all that is good recognises the bad angel in false consolation immediately and faultlessly.<sup>11</sup> (Exx 335)

There is a text in the *Constitutions* which reminds us of this last quoted passage from the *Spiritual Exercises*. It is the text which describes the qualities the Superior General should have:

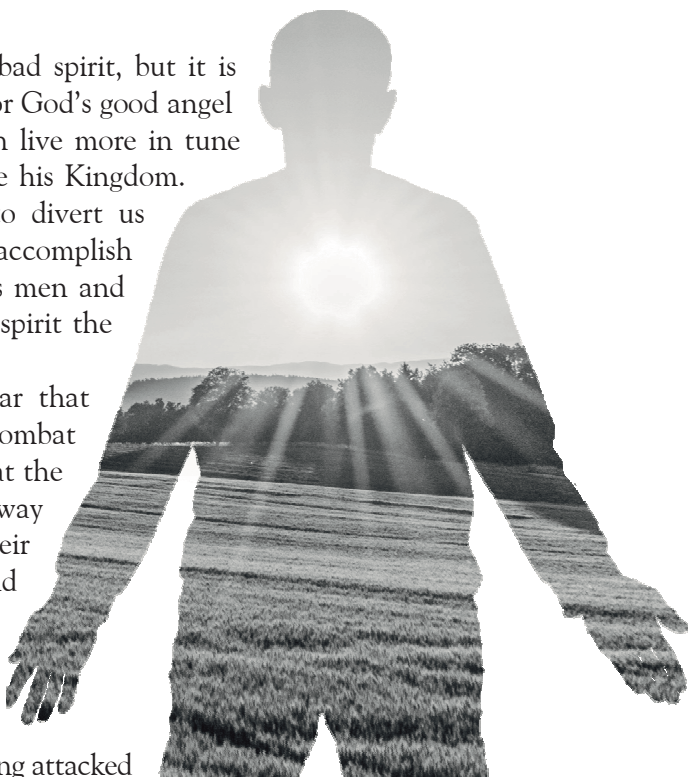
The first quality is that he should be closely united with God our Lord and have familiarity with him in prayer and in all his operations, so that from him, the fountain of all good, he may so much the better obtain for the whole Society a large share of his gifts and graces, as well as great power and effectiveness for all the means to be employed for the help of souls (*Constitutions*, IX. 2. 1 [723]).

We never receive consolation just for ourselves.

### ***The Horizon That Is God***

We have to fight against the bad spirit, but it is the consolation given by God or God's good angel that will show the way we can live more in tune with Christ and so better serve his Kingdom. Because the bad spirit tries to divert us from the way in which we can accomplish our most profound vocation as men and women, Ignatius calls the bad spirit the 'enemy of our human nature'.

The context makes it clear that retreatants are involved in a combat between good and bad, and that the bad spirit wants to tear them away from themselves, away from their deeper vocation. Patience and perseverance, as we saw, are important attitudes during desolation. Resistance to the temptations of the bad spirit is necessary. Vigilance, to avoid being attacked



<sup>11</sup> See Jules Toner, *A Commentary on Saint Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits: A Guide to the Principles and Practice* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1982), 238–239.

at our weak points, is another attitude necessary in a time of desolation. We need inner strength. Therefore, during a time of consolation or in a tranquil time we have to exercise ourselves in patience, modesty, humility, generosity and in all the other virtues.

We must never lose the horizon that is God, who invites us to a relationship, a relationship of love which fulfils our deepest aspirations. Only consolation will maintain us on the track. Consolation is a gift from God, who communicates Godself—God's love—in this way; consolation deepens our relationship with God. If the bad spirit tries to weaken us, the good spirit, the angel of God, helps us on our way to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord (Exx 23).

**Mark Rotsaert SJ** is a Flemish Jesuit. He has been novice master for the North Belgium and Dutch Provinces, twice provincial of the North Belgium Province, President of the Conference of European Jesuit Provincials, superior of the Jesuit community at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, and is currently senior research fellow at Campion Hall, Oxford. He has translated the *Spiritual Exercises*, the *Spiritual Diary*, and about forty letters of Ignatius into Dutch, and collaborated in a Dutch edition of the *Autobiography*.

# DISCERNING WITH OTHERS (CHRISTIAN OR NOT) FOR AN INTEGRAL ECOLOGY IN ACTION

*Cécile Renouard*

LET US BEGIN with the case of the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) movement in France from November 2018: the massive mobilisation of citizens from poor and rural areas resisting the decision made by the government—on ecological grounds—to increase motor-fuel taxes. This movement has highlighted the social divide in France and the need to combine social with ecological justice. In this context, the voice of the French bishops, at least at the beginning, has been extremely weak, with some of them merely asking people not to be violent. This is, in my view, highly symptomatic of a lack of collective discernment regarding the dysfunction of our economic and political institutions. As Christians, if we focus on individual discernment, we may not play a role appropriate for dealing with structural injustice. We may silently favour the status quo. This is exactly the perspective denounced by the Pope in *Laudato si'* when he criticizes the 'halfway measures' that 'simply delay the inevitable disaster' (n. 194).

The social and ecological issues that we are facing today urge an ecological conversion for all human beings—Christians and other people of good will. *Laudato si'* seeks to promote an integral ecology in action through different kinds of dialogue, which are specifically addressed in the fifth chapter: dialogue between faith and scientific reason, and dialogue between politics and economics. A deep revision of our economic models and our lifestyles is needed, and this presupposes the active participation of the people in order to interdict powerful short-term financial interests that prevent politicians and business leaders from serving the common good. It is interesting to note that the word 'discernment' is used in the encyclical in relation to a very concrete topic—when the Pope gives the example of the right to water (n. 185).

A collective discernment is needed within the Church and our communities of faith, but also, and even more importantly, within our working institutions, our political societies. We desperately need Christians and others—notably those who have influential positions in society—to raise their voices against structural injustice and global evils, and to take part in different social movements in order to tackle the causes of the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth.

This perspective raises several problems. First, the matter of collective discernment has to be specified; we know that a key condition for good discernment is asking the right question. Moreover, as we have limited resources (in terms of time, energy and so on), we need to apply our discernment to the most important issues. As far as integral ecology is concerned, the object has to be prioritised and well defined. Secondly, the appropriate process of collective discernment has to be agreed upon. The methodology has to be applicable in different settings: can we find some common attitudes and criteria relevant for different contexts, different stakeholders? Thirdly, is it legitimate to speak of discernment from a non-Christian perspective or, more precisely, to apply some of the guidelines of spiritual collective discernment to the secular arena? Can we listen collectively to the Spirit even with people who do not share Christian, or even religious, beliefs? What spiritual resources can be mobilised in secular contexts?

I propose a threefold perspective:

1. Discernment for integral ecology engages a focus on means—and on the narratives that support them—even more than on ends.
2. Among the conditions for a collective discernment, I would like to highlight the attitude of detachment (indifference) and show its relevance from a collective viewpoint.
3. As Christians, we need to discern together with non-Christians in a respectful way, without losing our own spiritual roots.

I will first detail the ethical principles underlying the ‘ecological transition’ demanded by integral ecology, and argue that collective discernment must apply primarily to their implementation. I will then move on to the concrete steps in a collective discernment process and the role of collective spiritual attitudes in fostering discernment about the changes that are necessary in public policy, economic model and lifestyle.

***Discerning in Common about the Means of Integral Ecology***

The implementation of ecological transition—the shift from a society orientated towards economic growth to one orientated towards sustainability, in accordance with the 2015 Paris Agreement—implies a collective discernment that needs to be focused not so much on the end itself as on the diverse and competing means of achieving it. Even if some leaders, as well as citizens, question the existence or the human origin of climate change, there is a global consensus about the seriousness of the current environmental situation and the urgency of reducing our carbon emissions and ecological footprint.<sup>1</sup> If we are aware of the limits of planetary resources and the unsustainable nature of models built on the extraction of fossil fuels, blood ores and pollution, what conclusions can we draw for the transformation of the lifestyles of the most affluent of our societies? How can discernments about responsibilities lead to non-violent social and political engagement, the forms of which may be reinvented for our contemporary context? Appropriate stories, methodologies and steps for achieving these objectives are lacking.



© Steve Eason

*Extinction Rebellion protesters in London, November 2018*

<sup>1</sup> See Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014); *Climate Ethics: Essential Readings*, edited by Stephen Gardiner and others (Oxford: OUP, 2010).



*The Object: A Relational Eco-Justice*

The objective of integral ecology can be summarised as a viable earth today and tomorrow for all human and other sentient beings. I will not enter here into the debates concerning anthropo-, patho-, bio- and eco-centred perspectives. As Bryan Norton points out, a weak anthropocentrism can be empirically and pragmatically aligned with bio- and eco-centred perspectives in terms of ethical commitment.<sup>2</sup> All these perspectives will defend a robust sustainability, advocating arguments and policies that respect safe planetary boundaries.<sup>3</sup> Three aspects can be identified that are constitutive of what I call a relational eco-justice:<sup>4</sup>

- the sustainable creation and management and the fair sharing of resources (the economic dimension);
- the recognition of every person, including the most vulnerable (the sociocultural dimension);
- the participation, cooperation and/or representation of affected beings in the decision-making process (the political dimension).

Relational eco-justice is consistent with Catholic social teaching, with its insistence upon fairness, the search for the common good, the preferential option for the poor and subsidiarity. I argue that its three aspects can easily be acknowledged as legitimate goals in our societies, since they are also consistent with internationally agreed principles and guidelines.<sup>5</sup> Some countries and groups may not share these goals, but we do not need discernment to know that the goals need to be defended. Instead, what should be at the heart of discussion and of the discernment process are the diverse and competing means of reaching these objectives in an uncertain and complex world.

<sup>2</sup> Bryan Norton, 'Durabilité', in *La Pensée écologique. Une anthologie*, edited by Dominique Bourg and Augustin Fragnière (Paris: PUF, 2005), 473.

<sup>3</sup> For planetary boundaries, see Johan Rockström and others, 'A Safe Operating Space for Humanity', *Nature*, 461 (24 September 2009), 472–475.

<sup>4</sup> See Cécile Renouard, 'Pétrole et lien social. Pour une responsabilité politique de l'entreprise', *Revue Française de Socio-Économie*, hors-série 16 (2015), 89–104; Cécile Renouard, 'Corporate Social Responsibility, Utilitarianism and the Capabilities Approach', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 98/1 (2011), 85–97.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the principles of the International Labour Organization ([www.ilo.org](http://www.ilo.org)), the Sustainable Development Goals and the framework on business and human rights of the United Nations (<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>; <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/un-secretary-generals-special-representative-on-business-human-rights/un-protect-respect-and-remedy-framework-and-guiding-principles>) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's guidelines for multinational enterprises (<http://www.oecd.org/corporate/mne/>).

*Collective Responsibilities for the Means to Achieve Eco-Justice*

The debate on the financial, technical and political means to achieve eco-justice is often conceived either in terms of public policies and business strategies, or in terms of personal responsibility and local initiatives at the grass-roots level. This dichotomy is problematic. On the one hand, public and private institutions are ill-equipped to nurture the empowerment of the poor and the conditions for 'prosperity without growth'.<sup>6</sup> Structural reforms are needed, but such institutions are not capable on their own of ensuring the quality of bonds between individuals.

On the other hand, individual action can be seen as insufficient to bring about any large-scale transformation. An increasing number of activists are advocating personal transformation as a key factor for global change. This is consistent with the focus on individual, personal discernment that is often promoted in Christian spirituality, including Ignatian spirituality. However, such a perspective may bypass the need for collective discernment and action as a key condition for institutional and systemic change.<sup>7</sup> As complexity theory shows, we are facing emerging phenomena that are not the result of the simple aggregation of individual actions.

Thus, we must collectively look at ways to implement a transformative utopia through a common moral and political responsibility towards the planet and future generations that combines a structural perspective with a concern for the micro level, the quality of interpersonal relations.<sup>8</sup>

*Individualising Collective Responsibilities*

Collective discernment has to focus on recognising the shared responsibilities of actors, both corporate and individual, for the implementation of fairer institutions that can work towards eco-justice. Iris Young's social connection model strives to take into account our shared responsibilities.<sup>9</sup> She has extended Hannah Arendt's analysis of the distinction between moral and political responsibility, proposing a distinction between an individual moral (and criminal) responsibility, linked to past mistakes, and a political, collective responsibility, linked to the desire to prevent

<sup>6</sup> See Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth: The Transition to a Sustainable Economy* (London: Sustainable Development Commission, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Pierre Rabhi, *As in the Heart So in the Earth: Reversing the Desertification of the Soul and the Soil* (Rochester: Park Street, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Cécile Renouard, *Un Monde possible. Les acteurs privés face à l'injustice* (Paris: Seuil, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Iris Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), chapter 4.

future disasters and to strengthen the protection and compensation of victims.<sup>10</sup> This proposal emphasizes how the responsibilities of agents are interwoven, which makes it very difficult to determine culprits—those to whom fault can be attributed. It also shows that the desire to find culprits itself tends to provoke inertia and to prevent the collective mobilisation of individuals: ‘practices of blame and fault-finding ... are usually unproductive in politics where the harms are a repeated product of structural social processes’.<sup>11</sup>

The perspective of collective responsibility favours a reasoning that distinguishes different parameters relevant to different actors:

- power (for example that of the multinationals);
- privilege (of the richest);
- interest in taking action (of the victims);
- collective capacity to act (for example of unions, churches or investors).<sup>12</sup>

The goal is to counteract the diverse expressions of inertia, such as reification (‘treating products of human action ... as though they are things or natural forces’); the denial of our connections with others; immediate concerns that stand in the way of a long-term perspective; or the refusal to admit our power to act (‘not my job’).<sup>13</sup> The goal is also to promote fraternity and solidarity, and not to be swayed by resentment, a sense of victimisation or guilt.

However, we must ensure that what Iris Young is proposing does not remove any of the responsibility borne by leaders, which is greater than that borne by others. In this respect, the important question to ask is precisely how each person intervenes in the process, in the fabric of social relations. It is probably necessary, also, to pay more attention than she does to certain dimensions of our human experience and context. In a ‘sympathetic critique’ of Young, Jacob Schiff discusses thoughtlessness, bad faith and misrecognition as ‘persistent impediments to any confrontation with our political responsibility’.<sup>14</sup> How can we encourage a leader, in

<sup>10</sup> Young, *Responsibility for Injustice*, chapter 3.

<sup>11</sup> Young, *Responsibility for Injustice*, 115–116.

<sup>12</sup> Young, *Responsibility for Injustice*, 144 following.

<sup>13</sup> Young, *Responsibility for Injustice*, 154, 165.

<sup>14</sup> Jacob Schiff, ‘Confronting Political Responsibility: The Problem of Acknowledgment’, *Hypatia*, 23/3 (2008), 99–117, here 103.

particular, to open up beyond a political position into which he or she may be locked, to look at situations in a new way?

Moreover, it is problematic to divide, as Young does, the retrospective and prospective dimensions. Responsibility for the future cannot be separated from an analysis of responsibilities in relation to past actions and institutions. We must be able to define the terms of collective action in a more precise way, linking the moral and the political by individualising collective responsibility—that is to say, by emphasizing that moral and political responsibility must be specified according to the place that each occupies in the channels of social connection. Mathias Nebel proposes a useful typology that distinguishes responsibility by instigation (being at the origin of behaviours, practices or organizations); collaboration (being actively involved in unjust institutions); collusion (endorsing the existence of an unjust institution); and omission (tolerating passively).<sup>15</sup> The first two clearly relate to fault liability, whereas the others can be understood according to the principle of political responsibility.

### ***Processes in Common***

At this point we may attempt to define a collective discernment process for eco-justice in four steps: the matter to be discerned, active listening and analysis, deliberation, and decision.

1. The matter to be discerned has to be located in relation to eco-justice, and the means of achieving it discussed in terms of guiding principles (autonomy and interdependence, frugality and equity, non-violence and inclusion/participation) and of the general aim (integral ecology as a transformative utopia). What are the tensions underlying the situation?
2. In active listening and analysis the importance of a broad overview has to be highlighted. Understanding the connections and the positions of the different actors involved in the process leads to the individualisation of collective responsibilities.
3. Deliberation is the dialogical moment when participants in the discernment try to weigh the different possibilities and reflect on the necessary way forward, leading to the fourth step, the decision.

<sup>15</sup> Mathias Nebel, *La Catégorie morale de péché structurel* (Paris: Cerf, 2006).

4. In the decision the choice of individual and collective action is made. The discernment process can precede different kinds of decision-making: prescriptive, participatory or collaborative.

In the case of Jesuit group discernment, decision-making is participatory. There is a collective process, and a search for a collective 'enlightenment'; but, in the end, the one who has the authority will decide. In other groups, whether denominational or not, the decision can be collaborative, and in such cases a common way to decide is by consensus. It is useful to consider how the discernment process can work in both denominational and non-denominational contexts.

#### *Discernment in a Denominational Context*

Two Jesuit writers, John Carroll Futrell and Jules Toner, have proposed similar methods for group discernment within a Christian community.<sup>16</sup> These methods entail both external and internal conditions. Apart from a clearly defined subject, and an accurate knowledge and analysis of that subject, the external conditions require that the way forward—the rules governing the discernment process—be clear. A very precise analysis of the different kinds of actors, connections and responsibilities involved is particularly important.

#### ***A collective listening for the motions of the Spirit***

In terms of internal conditions, each participant should be detached from him- or herself, and aiming for the good of the whole body. Active listening—so as to be consciously attentive and responsive to the speaker—and measured, intentional speech are promoted; the process should be non-confrontational, not imposing upon another's truth but sharing perceptions and feelings. All participants should cultivate a collective listening for the motions of the Spirit, paying attention to their different feelings while desiring to do the will of the Father beyond these feelings.

A complementary possibility, elaborated in Futrell's account and found in several other sources (especially from the USA in the early 1970s after Vatican II), consists in discerning pros and cons. This approach is inspired by the 1539 Deliberation of the First Fathers, which is the central source-text for practising an Ignatian method of discernment in

<sup>16</sup> John Carroll Futrell, 'Communal Discernment: Reflections on Experience', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 4/5 (November 1972), 159–194; Jules Toner, 'A Method for Communal Discernment of God's Will', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 3/4 (September 1971), 121–151.

common.<sup>17</sup> Finally, the importance of the ex-post examination is stressed: the motions must be reread to confirm what the deliberation is about.

The subject matter of integral ecology brings some additional challenges to this method of discernment. The issues to be discerned are likely to involve tensions and possible conflicts of interpretation concerning our different institutions and their ability to implement the different aspects of a relational eco-justice. The community of persons who are discerning have to reflect not only from their own perspective and that of their particular grouping but also from other perspectives—those of the poor, of future generations and so on. They have to weigh the power, privilege, motivation and collective capacity of different people, perhaps going beyond their own communal short-term or more immediate interests.

This is true for discernments about relatively small matters, such as a community's food habits and consumption of other products, but it also applies to investment strategies. In this regard, we might wonder why the international religious orders have such great difficulty in combining their efforts to promote ethical and environmentally aware financial investments. The conversations I have within my own order, and with people in charge of finance in different orders, show that there is a lack of collective discernment on this topic, including at the grass-roots community level. On certain issues, indeed, some non-denominational groups (NGOs, for example), seem to be far ahead in terms of collective dialogue and action.

### *Discernment in a Non-Denominational Context*

Here I shall build on an approach which is not a discernment methodology *per se* but which includes steps that are highly consistent with deliberation on the means and implementation of a shared vision. Bill Sharpe, a former head of research in a big company, has developed the 'three horizons' approach in order to help change-designers and change-makers in different settings.<sup>18</sup>

The goal is threefold, creating a space for deliberation and reflective practice:

<sup>17</sup> See Jules Toner, 'The Deliberation That Started the Jesuits: A Commentary on the *Deliberatio primorum patrum*, Newly Translated, with a Historical Introduction', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 6/4 (July 1974).

<sup>18</sup> Bill Sharpe, *Three Horizons: The Patterning of Hope* (Axminster: Triarchy, 2013).

- to understand complex situations better;
- to ‘put yourself in the picture’, acknowledging your own place in the process;
- to reach better disagreements (a core aspect of democracy).<sup>19</sup>

Achieving this goal is a question of defining a vision concerning an ideal situation to reach at a certain point (horizon 3, or H3), starting from an initial situation (horizon 1, H1) and plotting a course to reach it (horizon 2, H2). The course goes from H1 to H3 through H2.

We can also understand these horizons as different types of posture and mentality—as different ways of approaching realities. H1 is the perspective of the *manager*, the one who must cope with the present situation, business as usual. H3 is the position of the *visionary*, the one who does not accommodate the dead ends or failures of the present world, but anticipates a better future and identifies what is possible. H2 is the way the *entrepreneur* plots a course, which may be designed from the perspective of the old world (H2–) or from the objectives of H3 (H2+).<sup>20</sup>

The aim is to develop a collective approach to topics that can be extremely varied, involving people who possess a certain level of knowledge on the subject, so as not to establish maps that have nothing to do with the paths that are possible. The method consists in creating a space for dialogue, listening and shared creativity, from different points of view, by placing ourselves on each horizon and seeing through the eyes of different stakeholders.

This perspective also insists on the epistemology underlying our understanding of the world, the ways in which we look at reality. Reality is made up of both processes and structures. Part of what is at stake is the ability to be attentive to processes, to the energies that direct our actions and can contribute to the reorientation and reshaping of structures and institutions. The emphasis placed on flows, on networks of relations, makes possible a freer approach to structures and ways of reorganizing them, in the knowledge that these structures also inform the ways in which we are connected to each other and how we perceive the world.<sup>21</sup> Is there an ethical questioning behind this? The author of the three horizons method emphasizes that, like any tool, it can be used in

<sup>19</sup> See Bill Sharpe and others, ‘Three Horizons: A Pathways Practice for Transformation’, *Ecology and Society*, 21/2 (2016), at <https://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol21/iss2/art47/>.

<sup>20</sup> Sharpe, *Three Horizons*, 12–13.

<sup>21</sup> Sharpe, *Three Horizons*, 36–37.



different ways, for better or for worse. Here I would propose to use the method with an underpinning ethical and spiritual perspective.

This brings us back to the fourth step in collective discernment: the decision. I turn here to the example of the Quakers, who have a long tradition that has inspired anarchists and, more recently, the Occupy movement.

*The Quakers and the Consensus-Making Process*<sup>22</sup>

The sociologist and activist George Lakey expresses well the aim of the consensus decision-making process: it ‘doesn’t mean everyone fully supports every decision. It means everyone can live with the decisions the group makes.’ The process is as follows:

1. Discuss issue.
2. Develop proposals.
3. Test proposal(s) for clarification and then agreement. People can disagree in a number of ways:  
*Reservation* (‘I have reservations but will let this pass’);  
*Stand-aside* (‘I disagree with this, and will not help make it happen, but I won’t stop the group from doing it’); and  
*Block* (‘I have a fundamental disagreement with this proposal and will not allow it to go ahead’). In strict CDM, it is ‘one person, one block’. The next-strongest version is ‘consensus-minus-one’, where it needs two people to block a proposal.
4. If there are any blocks (in strict consensus) or if there are too many reservations and/or stand-asides, go back to stage 1 or 2.
5. If there are no blocks, and not too many reservations or stand-asides, you have active agreement, or consensus, go on to stage 6.
6. Agree who’s going to do what by when.
7. Carry out the decision.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> I rely on numerous sources here: meetings with the Quakers of Totnes (participation in worship and a business meeting); discussions with Paul Parker, the recording clerk of the Quakers in Britain; discussions with Sam Walton, an English Quaker and anti-war activist; writings by various other activists, including George Lakey; Quaker testimonials; and Andrew Cornell’s book *Oppose and Propose! Lessons from Movement for a New Society* (Oakland: AK/Institute of Anarchist Studies, 2011) on the effects of Quakerism on anarchist movements in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s.

<sup>23</sup> George Lakey and Milan Rai, ‘Activism and the Limits of Consensus’, *Peace News*, 2547–2548 (July–August 2012), available at <https://peacenews.info/node/6863/activism-and-limits-consensus>.



© Caroline Schiff

Signalling consensus at the general assembly of  
Occupy Wall Street

This process benefits from the self-critical reading that members of the Movement for a New Society (a progressive movement dedicated to non-violent direct action, created in the US in 1971 by a group of Quakers including Lakey) have made of their past commitment to consensus and the limits, even today, of this approach when it becomes tyrannical or obstructed.

The goal, when the process is carried out well, is to reach a strong agreement between the members of a group. Sam Walton speaks of the distinction between peace as *shalom* (deep unity) and as *pax* ('peace and quiet', like the *pax romana*).<sup>24</sup> For successful consensus, an agreement should be more *shalom* than *pax*. For

Walton, the main criterion for success is the ability of the group to put the collective agenda ahead of personal ones.

It is for this reason that spiritual inspiration can be very important. At the limits of a 'horizontal' approach to decision-making, and in the absence of anyone having authority over others, consensus involves living an apprenticeship in democracy, which requires great commitment, training, personal accountability beyond the reliance on authority, and both personal and collective discipline: putting one's agenda in the background, not intervening all the time, leaving room for everyone and not necessarily seeking absolute agreement. This means fighting against the tendency of some to take power over others illegitimately, and valuing the empowerment of all. Leadership is reconceived as facilitation, empowerment and support for the capacity-building of each.

<sup>24</sup> See discussion in Sam Walton, 'A Good Question: Peace on Earth—How?', *Reform Magazine* (December 2017–January 2018), available at <https://www.reform-magazine.co.uk/2017/11/a-good-question-peace-on-earth-how/>.

### ***Detachment Matters***

The attitude of detachment is necessary to all discernment processes. Detachment is at the core of Ignatian and Christian discernment; it is particularly relevant from a collective perspective; and it can be used in common with other religious and spiritual traditions. However it needs to be understood correctly, as modernity has led to a form of detachment that has had lasting harmful effects on our societies. For, in the West, we have pushed the notion of detachment as far as *disengagement*, losing the metaphysical and relational dimension—detachment from the self-centred self in order to find the true self—which alone can allow detachment to inspire just attitudes to the world, to others and to the self.

Discernment needs to rediscover this relational capacity (not only individually, but also collectively). Even the spiritual perspective itself, in the Western world, has been marked by a concern for the individual, at the risk of losing the sense of belonging to environments and collectives—and by a concern for the institution, without giving priority to the quality of interpersonal relations. I argue that detachment is key to reintroducing the concern for the collective, especially in the transformation of our structures and institutions.

#### *Disengagement: Disembedding and Social Atomisation*

Modernity faces a threefold risk from disengagement. According to the philosopher Charles Taylor, the first risk is a solipsistic, intimate withdrawal, related to the concern for individual well-being, ‘a centring on the self, which both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society’.<sup>25</sup>

The second risk is related to the outlook of logical-mathematical intelligence:

The yardstick that henceforth applies is that of instrumental reason .... Once the creatures that surround us lose the significance that accrued to their place in the chain of being, they are open to being treated as raw materials or instruments for our projects.<sup>26</sup>

This objectification, while distancing the world and other beings from us, potentially leads to excessive control, and paradoxically nourishes

<sup>25</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP, 2003 [1991]), 4.

<sup>26</sup> Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 5.

an in(de)finite appropriation of the world (capitalism) and an alienating relation to others (when carried to the extreme, totalitarian power).

The third risk, for Taylor, is a political one, whose consequences are particularly relevant today:

The institutions and structures of industrial-technological society severely restrict our choices .... A case in point is our great difficulties in tackling even vital threats to our lives from environmental disasters ....<sup>27</sup>

The danger here consists in keeping the natural environment at a distance, bypassing each person's inscription in vital environments.

*The Positive Side: The Self-Limitation of the Detached Subject*

In many respects, Western modernity must be welcomed in the advances it has made possible and, despite the dangers of disengagement, in the increased perception it has fostered of the interconnectedness between all human beings all over the world. Modernity's advocates can easily cite its capacity to improve material living conditions through science and technology; the virtues of performance and efficiency have sometimes been underrated by its critics. But the question for integral ecology is how to foster a transformative perspective while being embedded into the flesh of the world, rather than allowing disengagement to lead to the appropriation of the world.

One positive aspect of modernity, and a key contribution of enlightenment, is an autonomous critical and self-critical capacity that is related to a certain kind of detachment. This concerns the subject's ability to govern his or her own reason with an internal critique of the tradition that he or she inhabits, appropriating its codes and representations; it also concerns the ability to perceive or to question deviations within it, or to promote a re-elaboration of the tradition from within, in a relationship that is alive to that tradition but open to other contributions.

What goes with this capacity, and is less frequently emphasized by today's critics, is a certain call for self-limitation. Cornelius Castoriadis points out that the postmodern critique of modernity—which he considers to be the fable that all the stories are equal—misses out on the strength and uniqueness of Western modernity, as well as of ancient Greece: the

<sup>27</sup> Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 8.

capacity to challenge, to exercise critical and self-critical thinking about one's own history, traditions and institutions.

Among the creations of human history, one is singularly singular: the one that permits the society under consideration to itself call itself into question. This is the creation of the idea of autonomy, of the reflective return upon oneself, of criticism and self-criticism, of a questioning that neither knows nor accepts any limit. This creation therefore takes place at the same time as democracy and philosophy. For, just as a philosopher cannot accept any external limitations on his thought, so democracy recognizes no external limits to its instituting power; the sole limits result from its self-limitation.<sup>28</sup>

We must not, therefore, confuse the strength of the reflexive and self-critical capacity of political liberalism in its defence of democratic principles and functioning with the predatory will of capitalism, which is based precisely on the refusal of self-restraint.

The universalist ethical perspective—the promotion of universal benevolence—is also largely a fruit of modernity. The detached spectator can be understood as called to serve the overall vision that presents itself as benevolent; this has fostered an understanding of the sources of universal benevolence as non-denominational (beyond our particular point of view, or inscribed in our deep nature).

Collectively, we need to promote these positive versions of detachment, which are at odds with its negative form as disengagement. This is a key aspect of the discernment that we have to carry out in order to bring about an integral ecology. It implies a consideration for the quality of relationships from the perspective of mutual respect and recognition, from the perspective of the fair creation of wealth and a fair share of the wealth created (with the notion of self-restraint), and from the perspective of participation and representation leading to the implementation of democratic principles, paying particular attention to the worse off in society and to the voiceless.

### ***The Same Path is Not Asked of Everyone***

Will discernment lead us all towards the same decision? We can argue in favour of a gradual progress, for different reasons. The first reason is the reality of the uniqueness of each person, and the specific place occupied

<sup>28</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Rising Tide of Insignificance*, available at <http://www.notbored.org/RTI.pdf>, 151.

by particular people, for a particular time, in society, in an institution, whatever it may be. We must accept that what counts is that the goal of the common good requires a more radical commitment (detachment) on the part of some people than others. Secondly, at the individual level as at the collective level, transformations are by nature gradual, taking into account people's different positions in social institutions and processes, and their differing capacity to act. Relevant in this connection is Iris Young's notion of shared and differentiated responsibilities.

Finally, in the wisdom of religious and spiritual traditions there is the image of the path and the fact that the same path is not asked of everyone. The three kinds of humility in St Ignatius, for example, express three different levels of detachment and engagement:

The First Way of Being Humble is necessary for eternal salvation, and consists in this. I so lower and humble myself, as far as is in my power, that in all things I may be obedient to the law of God our Lord ....

The Second Way of Being Humble is more perfect than the first .... I do not desire or feel myself strongly attached to having wealth rather than poverty, or honour rather than dishonour, or a long life rather than a short one.

The Third Way of Being Humble is the most perfect, and consists in this. When I possess the first and second ways, and when the options equally further the praise and glory of God, in order to imitate Christ our Lord better and to be more like him here and now, I desire and choose poverty with Christ poor rather than wealth; contempt with Christ laden with it rather than honours. Even further, I desire to be regarded as a useless fool for Christ, who before me was regarded as such, rather than as a wise or prudent person in this world. (Exx 165–167)

As Ignatius says, all are not called to dispose themselves in this way. We need inspiring figures, not to create inimitable models or to mimic them, but to let ourselves be dragged along the paths of life. It is undoubtedly the depth of the spiritual experience lived by some that is able to make us resonate with what is deepest in us, that enables us to find our own unique form of holiness.<sup>29</sup> Can we expand this perspective to groups, not only from a religious order, who in different ways share the

<sup>29</sup> See Christoph Theobald, *Le Christianisme comme style* (Paris: Cerf, 2008).

same calling, but also from diverse backgrounds? Today, we need role models at a collective level, grass-roots initiatives that show us that it is possible to live differently and beautifully. This leads us to the necessary narratives we have to invent, write, live and share.

To conclude, collective—and not only personal—discernment is needed in our complex societies in order to design and implement new models adjusted to the global challenges of environmental crisis. This discernment faces many difficulties, but it also meets several contemporary expectations: morality viewed as a dynamic process, the interwoven nature of responsibilities, and going beyond a self-centred search for well-being and a good life to look for the common good and for just institutions.

I have stressed some conditions for a relevant process of discernment. The main emphasis is on the architectonic importance of detachment, which is both an intellectual category and an existential attitude; this makes it possible to leave room for welcoming otherness, for debates, to individualise collective responsibilities and to connect oneself differently to our living milieu. It is a treasury of the Christian faith and of other spiritual traditions, which calls each of us to cultivate it as a self-limiting principle, personally and collectively. Detachment is a universal attitude, a virtue that can help us engage collectively to invent new narratives and pathways.

**Cécile Renouard** is a professor of philosophy at Centre Sèvres, the Jesuit faculty in Paris, director of the Companies and Development Research Programme (CODEV) at ESSEC Business School, and president of Le Campus de la Transition. Her most recent book, written with Swann Bommier, is: *L'Entreprise comme commun* (2018).



# *The* FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

***The Furrow*, founded in 1950, is a pastoral journal which publishes articles on:**

- ***Liturgy, prayer and spirituality***
- ***Sexuality and social justice***
- ***Reform of Church structures, including the role of women***
- ***Contemporary dialogue between faith and culture***

**Features include: *Notes for preaching; Chronicle of current events; serious book reviews***

*Editor:* Ronan Drury, St Patrick's College, Maynooth, to whom editorial correspondence should be addressed.

*Rates:* Single copy: €2.75 (£1.90) (+ VAT €0.37), postage €0.95; Annual Subscription: Republic of Ireland €50.00. Northern Ireland £35.00. Great Britain €58.00/£38.00. Foreign €65.00/\$75.00/Stg£45.00; Student rate: €33.00/\$43.00/£28.00

*Subscriptions are payable in advance to:*

The Secretary, *The Furrow*, St Patrick's College,  
Maynooth, co. Kildare, Republic of Ireland.

Telephone: 7083741, fax: 7083908 (national code 01,  
international code +353 1).

E mail: [furrow.office@may.ie](mailto:furrow.office@may.ie)



NOVATE  
VOBIS  
NOVALE

*Back numbers and advertising rates* are available from the Secretary.