

Decision-Making

A More Useful Format For Discerning

by John Veltri, sj

Some thoughts on using this format

Every person makes choices and decisions. More thoughtful persons make thoughtful decisions. Faith filled persons make faith filled decisions. Prayerful persons make prayerful decisions. All this is done quite naturally according to those processes of experience, reflection, understanding, judgement we are all born with. Spiritual discernment makes use of all this in cooperation with the enlightenment and working of the grace of God's Spirit.

When we use the technical language of discernment some people tend to forget what they know already.

So the purpose of this article is to build on what you already know. My suggestion is that you begin by discerning your week by week choices with this format alone without the endnotes. Then after a couple of weeks using the format with the knowledge you already have, read the first endnote and intentionally and more explicitly make use of that particular point. Then in a couple of weeks read the next endnote and intentionally make use of that point etc. As you use the different sections of this pamphlet, you will soon realize that sometimes you will need only one or other step for this or that particular problem you are discerning. Often you do not have to go through each step every time you make a decision. Some decisions will not warrant that. Some decisions you will discern more intuitively or by habit or by testing the problem or issue

against some interior touchstone of your heart.

Thus you will grow in the skill of discernment and discernment will automatically be used in your daily walk with God.

All the material is taken, based on, or adapted from the Spiritual Exercises and the Autograph Directory of St. Ignatius. It is complete in itself; but it needs to be complemented by the use of the guidelines for discerning found in the Spiritual Exercises [\[313\]](#) - [\[336\]](#).

Some Presuppositions Behind This Format

- I am the one⁽¹⁾ making the decision; and I seek to do so in time of true consolation.
- I am as interiorly free as I can be for now given circumstances of time and place.
- Even now after much prayer I do not have clarity concerning the alternative that I am being called to follow. However, I do have clearly in my mind the different alternatives that are possible to choose from, be they two, three or more⁽²⁾.

Here Is The Basic Format For Discerning

I. Place yourself in the presence of God

II. Pray for freedom⁽³⁾ to understand and choose what is most in harmony with God's designs⁽⁴⁾ for me at this moment in my life.

III. Then use the four column method⁽⁵⁾. Take one set of the alternatives (for example, my accepting the teaching position in Toronto) and in God's presence make a list of the reasons and other aspects of the matter according to the following schema:

I will accept the Teaching Position in Toronto		I will NOT accept the Teaching Position in Toronto	
Advantages to me/us	Disadvantages to me/us	Advantages to me/us	Disadvantages to me/us

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Then take each of the other alternatives in turn and make a similar schema. After all the data has been worked on the solution may be there and the decision to be made has become rather evident⁽⁶⁾. If this is so then move to step V. Otherwise move to step IV.

IV Search for the solution with some form of meditative prayer.

Since the correct alternative has not surfaced, move into prayer with all the data in your heart⁽⁷⁾. Wait with prayer for the solution to emerge or to be given.

If, after this time of prayer, the correct alternative does not become more evident then look over all the advantages and disadvantages of the schemes and weigh them from the viewpoint of:

- a) -- Quality of reasons;
- b) -- Those reasons which more evidently lead to God's service:
- c) -- Consistency with my own grace history which includes a realistic appraisal of my own gifts and my essential needs at this time.

Then I make a choice and I go to prayer as in the next step V. Please note that there are other techniques to help one get to this point if the four columns have not worked. They are outlined below⁽⁸⁾.

V. Pray For Confirmation After making the I-am-quite-sure-this-is-what-I-ought-to-do choice, offer it to God and ask for confirmation⁽⁹⁾. If confirmation is not received I repeat the entire process or part of it.

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Notes To Help Further Reflection On The Above Points

1.

On the Spirituality of Personal Responsibility

Confer the adaptation of the pastoral of the American Bishops, note # 4 below. God's will is not something already "out there" planned and predetermined for us to discover.

2.

On the Preliminaries of Decision-Making

If you do not have the alternatives clearly in mind then you need to work through some preliminaries. These are much the same that we use naturally in beginning any decision process. They are put down in steps simply to help you focus more clearly, and as it were, cover any loop holes.

Step 1 Walk around the general problem to be solved by the decision.

This 'walking around' is a very natural activity. When one tries to explain how this is done, it becomes complicated! Therefore I will simply place some items here as an indicator of the sort of things a person will use to help clarify

and understand the problem: What are the background facts? my aptitude for the solution desired? ... What are my real feelings are involved? ... keep asking myself the 6 questions: what, why, how, where, when, so what? Get the feel of the general problem in different ways. Separate key issues from lesser issues Often we begin making a decision with only one key issue. Even then, there is need to clarify, analyze, see behind, for sometimes the key issue changes as a result of our walking around. Here are a few simple examples:

James wants to make a decision to go on a diet but after this walking around discovers that he only overeats after 10:30 at night while he is watching TV. Perhaps he needs to make a decision around the staying up at night and TV issue. Then again when he looks at that issue he may discover something else of greater significance etc.

Margaret wonders whether she should drop her morning job because her son needs to be taken to school since the walk there is too dangerous due to traffic. But once she walks around the issue she discovers that the only traffic hazard is the lack of a traffic light at the corner of Brandon and Wilson Streets. Now that she has the real issue she can proceed to discern how best to go about dealing with it.

Step 2 Check your assumptions and determine criteria.

Behind the determining of the key question (or issue) from lesser questions often are assumptions taken for granted. Assumptions are implicit criteria which determine one's looking at this rather than that data. For example, a person's desire to consider that offer to work in Arizona, may well be motivated by the simple preference for hot weather. On the other hand, it may be motivated because his arthritic condition is so bad that this consideration is essential. In the first instance you have an assumption and attachment (which a person may need to be free from to discern properly see note number); in the second instance a necessity which needs to be factored into any geographical move.

Step 3 Focusing with all or some of the following:

- a. -- Brainstorm the various possible solutions.
- b. -- State the solution clearly as a positive statement followed by its contrary.

For example, I will accept the office position; I will not accept the office position. If there are several key issues this kind of double statement is done for each in order of priority.

c. -- Set up the four column method for each double statement. There may be need to prioritize.

3.

On Becoming Spiritually Free

We are usually unfree because of disordered (inordinate) attachments. To recognize how God is moving one's heart, a person needs to be spiritually free - free from the influences of self-centredness, prejudices, fears, anxieties, preferences which filter, twist or block the Spirit's movements in one's being. This is experienced when one is in 'consolation' which also involves God's presence and love. At such times one's perspective is in greater harmony with God's perspective. In such moments one is like a balance at equilibrium.

A person cannot give oneself such a stance of freedom. This is God's gift. God's Spirit brings one to an affective equilibrium neither to do nor to reject some activity unless one recognizes God's Spirit moving one to do this or reject that. Often in the course of trying to arrive at a correct decision the awareness of disorder in one's attachments (to a person, a job, position, some possessions, some gift, or to a certain city etc.) emerges. What can one do when confronting such data?

Suggestions based on the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola

1. Be honest:

- a) -- Admit to yourself and to God how attached you really are by naming and owning your attachments as concretely as possible.
- b) -- Don't pretend to be free when you are not free.
- c) -- Recognize that you are not ready to pursue a decision.

2. Hold yourself as if you are free and the attachment is removed:

- a) -- Make an interior effort neither to want nor to reject the matter unless God alone move you.

- b) -- Tell God you would like to follow God's desires even if at the moment you have only "a desire for the desire."

3. Pray for the opposite:

- a) -- Pray for a readiness to do the opposite of that to which you may be inordinately attached.

- b) -- Ask God to transform and order your affections or desires. Pray insistently that God give you the grace to be free from the influence of disordered attachments.

- c) -- Pray to Jesus to go to his "Abba" for you asking for this gift of freedom.

4. Pray the parable on the three types of persons below

5. Do some penance. (As a sign (to oneself and to God) of the authenticity of your request ...some external gesture that costs may further the reality of your desire for the desire ...

6. Wait for the gift of freedom.

*The desire for the desire for the desire for the desire in time becomes
The desire for the desire for the desire in time becomes
The desire for the desire in time becomes
The desire for the very thing I was so unfree about!*

Three Types Of Persons -- The Parable

There are three types of persons. Each has won \$2,000,000 in a fair lottery. Each person fears their immediate attachment to this sum:

" What is the best use for the money? ... With whom do I share it? ... How will the rest of my life be affected? ... I may end up using this windfall for all the wrong purposes and end up missing my purpose in life! ... I may discover a great deal of hindrance in the peaceful service of God. ... "

However, they all wish to be free from the burden arising from their attachment.

The first type wants to get rid of the attachment to the money in order to find peace in God and to be assured of salvation. But the hour of death comes without making use of any means.

The second type also would like to rid themselves of a possible disordered attachment. But they wish to do so in such a way that they retain what they have acquired, so that God is to come to what they desire and they are not willing to entertain the possibility of giving up the sum of money in order to serve God better, if that should prove more in harmony with God's desires for them.

The third type want to get rid of the attachment but wish to do so in such a way that they desire neither to keep nor to give up the sum acquired. They seek to be free. They desire to choose to keep the sum acquired if God so inspires them to do so; they desire to relinquish the sum acquired if God so inspires them to do so. Meanwhile during the decision process they strive to conduct themselves as if every attachment to it had been broken. They will make efforts neither to want that, nor anything else, unless the service of God alone move them to do so. As a result, the desire to be better able to serve Jesus Our Lord and his Abba will be the cause of keeping or giving up the sum of money.

Some notes on this prayer exercise

This prayer exercise is intended to help in choosing the kind of life towards which the Spirit of God is drawing one. During this process a person must always take into account the real data of one's history. It is so easy to be misguided. One may be biased towards what is less helpful among possible choices in God's service. Also it is easier to imagine oneself as being open than to be actually open. Many of us have non-negotiables which can contaminate the discerning process. These non-negotiables may be hidden assumptions; or unacknowledged inordinate attachments; or habitual ways of handling our lives. This exercise concerning the different attitudes of three categories of persons may be useful for surfacing such areas of unfreedom. As such it can help one to assume a freer attitude in making choices. This Ignatian parable is much more profound than it seems because it deals with that interface where the creature resists the loving Creator.

In the first instance, the parable applies primarily to one's attitude toward

possessions as these impinge upon the material for decision-making. However by analogy this parable can touch the interior stances and those non-conscious, long forgotten, twilight decisions made long ago and still affecting one's choices. Hence in the place of the sum of money one can understand any one of the following: interior gifts ... non negotiables ... defense mechanisms ... habitual ways of handling life ... personal life-long dream ... assumptions ... the exaggerated behaviour flowing from one's shadow etc.

4.

Principle and Foundation and the Designs of God

We are created to share in God's love and life for eternity. The experience of this love is manifested in our response of praise, reverence and service, that is, loving God with all our heart, all our mind and all our will.

All of God's created order is intended to reveal this sharing of God's life and love. Therefore with all of humanity we are called to be one with the rest of creation; and with it, we are invited to move together into a deeper relationship with the loving Creator.

Whenever we are hindered, by another part of creation, from deepening this relationship, it becomes necessary to examine our connection with that part to ensure that we are not hindered in pursuing our call. Often we may need to choose to separate ourselves from such barriers.

It is true that we can only grow in our relationship with God by cooperating with other members of the human family in caring for each other and for creation itself. Nevertheless it is also true that we are not to become so dependent on any part of creation that we would be distracted or separated from our fundamental relationship with our God. This means that whenever we make choices concerning any aspect of work and life, we are to be interiorly free with respect to those concerns that make obstacles of creation - long life or short life; health or sickness; riches or poverty; comfort or discomfort; being accepted or rejected; status or non-status.

Therefore, our highest priority is to be this relationship with God shining through all our choices and everything that flows from these choices.

-- paraphrase of Principle and Foundation of Ignatius of Loyola

What follows is another contemporary "principle and foundation" adapted from a pastoral of the American Bishops on the challenges of our nuclear age

Let us have the courage to believe in the bright future and in a God who wills it for us - not a perfect world, but a better one. The perfect world, we Christians believe, is beyond the horizon in an endless eternity where God will be all in all. But a better world is here for human hands and hearts and minds to make.

For the community of faith the risen Christ is the beginning and end of all things. For all things were created through him and all things will return to ... (our God) ... through him.

It is our belief in the risen Christ which sustains us in confronting the awesome ... (challenges of the this age) Present in the beginning as the word of God, present in history as the word incarnate and with us today in ... word, sacraments and Spirit, (Jesus) is the reason for our hope and faith. Respecting our freedom, (God's Spirit) does not solve our problems, but sustains us as we take responsibility for ... creation and try to shape it in the ways of the kingdom. ... As we do this we are conscious of God's continuing work among us, which will one day issue forth in the beautiful final kingdom prophesied by the seer of the Book of Revelation, " Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away ... and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling of God is with humanity. God will dwell with them, and they shall be God's people ... 'Behold, I make all things new'" Rev 21:1-5.

5.

The Four Column Method

Please remember that the four column method is not Ignatius' preferred method. He proposes it as one possibility to use when one has not received consolation without previous cause; or when one can not discern from the movements of spirits (either because there are no movements or because clarity has not emerged from them). We propose it here (and this I owe to the practice and research of John English, sj) as a good technique to help clarify issues and to help "get the spirits moving", particularly useful in daily life for both individuals and groups.

6.

Choice Given in a Self-Evident Way?

It could happen that as one is progressing through the process of discerning a decision that one is given a consolation without previous cause which makes the choice evident removing all doubt that this is from God. At this point one needs to go no further. The process has disposed one for the grace received. Ignatius calls this the First Time [\[175\]](#) as in:

Three "Times" When A Good Choice Of A Major Life-Decision Life Decision May Be Made.

First Time. When God our Lord so moves and attracts the will that a devout soul without hesitation, or the possibility of hesitation, follows what has been manifested to it. St. Paul and St. Matthew acted thus in following Christ our Lord. (Ignatius always hoped that discernment of life decisions would come this way. But he wrote the Spiritual Exercises from the viewpoint of the Second Time as a way of disposing the person for the graces of the First Time)

[176] **Second Time.** When much light and understanding are derived through experience of desolations and consolations and discernment of diverse spirits.

[177] **Third Time.** This is a time of tranquillity. One considers first for what purpose of our existence - the praise of God our Lord and the salvation of our soul. With the desire to attain this before our mind, one chooses as a means to this end the proper alternative or decision that will be a help in the service and praise of God. I said it is a time of tranquillity, that is, a time when the soul is not agitated by different spirits, and has free and peaceful use of its natural powers.

One should note that in this third time Ignatius suggests that we seek confirmation [\[183\]](#) "... After such a choice or decision, the one who has made it must turn with great diligence to prayer in the presence of God our Lord, and offer Him his choice that the Divine Majesty may deign to accept and confirm it if it is for His greater service and praise." This means that the

ultimate touchstone for correctly discerning a decision is found in true consolation.

7.

On Praying With the Process of Discernment

Pray over your decision according to the method that time, place, and nature of the decision might require. Pray as you can do not pray as you can't (Dom Chapman). Sometimes you will just be in silence before God for a few moments. Other times you will take a half hour or longer each day for several days using one or other favorite passages from scripture. Most often you will probably use a Lectio Divina kind of prayer at other times you might use Gospel Contemplation.

Whatever the approach you use, bring your data and possible decisions with you in your heart or as part of your being. There is no secret way to do this so. Do it as best you can and God's Spirit will teach you the rest. In the midst of praying with scripture dialogue about them with God, present them to God ask for enlightenment from the Spirit. After the time of prayer make the review to discern what went on during the prayer time. In the examen of consciousness late in the day check out the consolations and desolations experienced during the past day. Through this prayer you are waiting for the solution to be given (confer endnote 4 above) or to emerge from your experience.

Now at some point you begin to notice that with alternative X you are more by yourself or on the periphery in the gospel scene. However with alternative Y you are more focused on Jesus, less on yourself, more outward. In other instances you notice with alternative X the time go by sluggishly but with alternative Y the time go by easily and more delicately. In other instances you notice that with alternative X you are in desolation and with alternative Y in consolation.

Thus you are discerning between consolation and consolation; (peace and peace) at other times between consolation and desolation; at other times between drop of water on stone and drop on a sponge etc.

8.

Some Other Techniques from the Spiritual Exercises

Here are some imagination techniques drawn from Ignatian Exercises that may help you make a choice if it doesn't easily emerge from your prayer.

Imagine Yourself Giving Advice To Another Person

Place a chair in front of yourself and imagine sitting and talking to you a person whom you have never seen or known, and whom you would like to see grow toward union with God. Then consider what you would tell that person to do and choose for the greater glory of God, her or his spiritual growth, and the building up of God's household. Adopt the same choice you would propose to another. Sp E's [\[185\]](#).

Imagine Yourself On Your Own Death Bed

This is to consider what procedure and norm of action I would wish to have followed in making the present choice if I were at the moment of death. I will guide myself by this and make my decision entirely in conformity with it. Sp E's [\[186\]](#)

Imagine Yourself At The Last Judgement

Let me picture and consider myself standing in the presence of my judge on the last day, and reflect what decision in the present matter I would then wish to have made. I will choose now the alternative that I would then wish to have chosen, that on the day of judgment I may be filled with happiness and joy. Sp E's [\[187\]](#)

Imagine Yourself Offering Several Dishes Of Food To A Royal Prince

During the days of chivalry at great feasts a variety of foods would be brought to the king and queen for their approval. At first a servant might present a platter of wild chicken. Second a platter of pork and third perhaps a platter of beef. During this presentation the servant would note their good pleasure from

their expressions, words, gestures.

Similarly here one goes to prayer and offers to God each of the alternatives. One notes the interior movements of one's heart. More peace - less peace. Consolations - desolations. Drop of water on a sponge - drop of water on a stone.

The "Trying-It-On-For-Size" Approach

This "trying-it-on-for-size" approach is a variation of the above technique. Here a person arbitrarily chooses one of the alternatives and lives with it in his or her heart for a set amount of time such as a few days. During this time this person goes to prayer, plans, and operates as if this alternative were chosen. Then he/she notes the spiritual movements taking place in heart during this time. After the set time is up this person takes another alternative for a similar length of time and notes at the end of this time the interior movements that were taking place and so on.....

9.

On Praying for Confirmation

Confirmation is not a notarized seal from God that testifies that the choice just made is the absolutely right decision and it will prove successful. Rather it is a subjective interior sense of congruence that one has gone about this decision correctly, that is, with as much interior freedom and love in one's heart as one can responsibly have for now, **in this time frame** and **with this data** as one has responsibly researched and considered it. It is a confirmation of the person who is making the decision and not the decision! It is a consolation -- not a magical zap!! but a flowering of that choice that one at first made with some fragility and hesitatingly.

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