

The Dynamics of the Exercises

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Lecture 7: The Election within the context of the Exercises

Week II of the Exercises

Introduction. The **existential context** of the Ignatian election is important. That context emerges from the prayer [meditation, contemplation, repetitions, and application of senses, daily examen, and liturgical worship], silence, and focus that constitute the culture of the Exercises. Concomitant with this structural context or culture is **the personal appropriation of the one making the retreat; that is, the way a man or woman has developed so that annotation # 15, and the rhythm it implies of personal grace and accountability to the guide, have become habitual.** This personal rhythm leads the one making the retreat to ask anew what I have done for Christ. What am I doing for Christ? What will I do for Christ? Or, given what I know now about who I am and who Christ is, how will I follow him authentically? That choice is the **Ignatian election, a decision made in the light of an ultimate relationship but touching all the relationships of my life.** The task of the guide or companion or “the one who gives the Exercises” is to guide this decision not to make it or to suggest what that decision should be.

Where did this Ignatian teaching on discernment come from? First, it came from **Christian tradition** itself. “All human beings who search for God want God to guide their lives, and Christians have been taught normatively to expect ‘to be guided by the Spirit’ (Gal. 5:18; Rom 8:14). Such expectations, both of a person and of the church itself, tend to put great emphasis upon **religious experience, upon an abiding interaction with God that engages affectivity and awareness, understanding and choice, prayer and action, intimate personal relationships, ecclesial solidarity, and the entire way of life of the community.** This emphasis becomes temptation (Gray Note: e.g., # [317]) only under the persuasion that the intensity of experience absolves one from discretion, critical reflection, and the doctrinal content of Christian faith, giving experience a priority over the unspeakable Mystery that approaches human beings through experience and transferring the religious guidance of a single person or of an entire community to an unchallengeable subjectivity, to sentimentality or superstition or excited enthusiasms. This sense of ambiguity, of the tension between longing and temptation, is found both in Pauline and Johannine theology. In the earliest canonical documents of the Church, Paul directs the Christian community: ‘Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophetic utterances. Test everything; retain what is good. Refrain from every kind of evil’ (I Thess 5:19-22). The First Letter of John counsels: ‘Beloved, do not trust every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they belong to God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world’ (I Jn 4:11). **Religious experience is almost always an equivocal reality, inherently ambiguous.** Even Christian freedom, for example, can be twisted into a pretext for evil (see Gal 5:13). All influences need to be tested prayerfully to determine their authenticity. To meet this need, the community must be gifted with the discernment of spirits” (from Michael J. Buckley, “Discernment of Spirits,” in *The New Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, edited by Michael Downey [Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993, 274-275]. **Second, from the personal experience of Ignatius Loyola,** as narrated in the *Acta* or *Autobiography*, which recapitulates this

older and wider Christian tradition and inspires and guides his teaching in the Exercises, his letters, and the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus.

How does discernment operate within the Spiritual Exercises? First, discernment lies within the dynamics of Christ's life choices and his ministry as these are narrated in the gospels. Therefore, discernment is part of the gospel contemplation that Ignatius proposes to the one making the Exercises. **Second**, in a series of pastoral directives, e.g., "Introduction to The Making of An Election," [169]-[180] and, notably, the two sets of the "Rules for The Discernment of Spirits," [313]-[327] and [328]-[336],

Third, Ignatius lays out two sets of guidelines for helping the person in the Exercises recognize the origin and the direction of various affective movements and ideas that emerge in a time of solitude and earnest seeking of God's will.

[a] "**The fourteen rules for the first week** are offered for those who are tempted 'openly and obviously,' i.e., either by the pleasure that attracts to evil or by the pain and cost that can deter from discipleship. Ignatius indicates two different subjects of such temptations and frames a matrix by which the influences upon their lives are united and contrasted (1-2). Consolation and desolation are defined (3-4). The subject is counseled how to act directly against desolation (5-6), against the thoughts that arise from desolation (7-11) and against the personal influences of evil (12-14).

[b] "**The eight rules for the second week** are much more subtle and deal with the experiences of being deceived or tempted under the appearance of good. At such a juncture it is no longer enough to know how to deal with the attraction to an obvious evil or with the repugnance for the good. These rules distinguish the consolation in which there is no danger of deception—when one is drawn wholly into the love of God without commensurate thoughts or images—from the consolation mediated by ideas or imagination (2-3) in which deception is possible. These latter must be tested for their authenticity. One must attend to the attraction toward the morally good by considering the beginning, the middle, and the end of the entire process. These rules outline the progress of deception disguised in apparent consolation (4) and frame a procedure whereby true and false consolations can be distinguished at the terminus of their influence (5), during the course of their influence (6) or even at the beginning of an integral religious 'movement' (7)" [from Michael Buckley, "Discernment," pp. 279-280; the numbers in parentheses refer to ## of the various rules for the First and Second Weeks of the Exercises].

Comments on Making an Election. The Ignatian **election material** falls under four subheadings: (1) an introductory statement # [169]; (2) directives regarding the scope of the election ## [170]-[174]; (3) the 'times' of an election ## [175]-[188]; and (4) amendment and reform of life # [189]. Ivens [in *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, p. 135] excellently observes that past choices that are unchangeable are choices that were truly discerned, to which I would add whether "changeable or unchangeable." Notice that **in the three times of an election** one moves from clear inspiration # [175] to affective movements # [176] to a faith-inspired period of peacefulness, i.e., Ignatius' 'tranquility' # [177]. **This third time of making an election # [177] is further divided into two ways of proceeding:** # [178] to # [183] and then # [184] to [187]. Finally the process of making an election ends on the note of consecration, # [188] a religious movement within confirmation that we will consider more closely in Weeks III and IV through Christ's confirmation of his discernment in his Passion, Death, & Resurrection.

