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## Thoughts about Making Choices

- I keep one conviction first: God keeps making me, momentarily, for this original purpose—to go back to God and give God my love.
- Some first choose to get rich, and then they decide to serve God as rich people. Some decide that they more or less have to marry and after that they can figure out how to serve God. Some choose to get ordained priests, and then ask God (really, require God) to accept their service as priests. Some reach for power, or popularity, or tenure, or successful careers—and so on, determined to serve God as powerful, popular, tenured, successful. I see this inversion as mistaken. Putting some creature first is not Jesus' way and not mine.
- When it comes to any serious decision about my life, I intend first to serve God and to love God—and then I will figure out what else to intend.
- I believe I come to know what God wants in many ways—commandments, the teaching of the Church, the advice of holy people and loving friends, my own spirit. I know that God leads me, by interior desire and inclination, and by exterior circumstance.
- What choices do I need to think about in the Exercises? Well, I have already chosen against anything sinful. But all of us have to choose among many good alternatives.
- During the Ignatian Exercises, I may be weighing life choices: marriage, single life, public service, religious congregation, priesthood, ministry, serious career. "Life-style," too, since it shapes much of what I am free to do and not to do. If I am working on this basic choice, I will find the Ignatian Exercises an excellent context in which to come to a decision based on my principle of serving God first. I can make this an occasion to center myself so that I am not led by an unbalanced desire or prejudice into a basic choice that is not authentic to myself and my God-given original purpose.
- What about a serious permanent decision already made? Say I'm married or a religious or a clinician. If I consider my original decision a good one, well made, then I have only to let God teach me how to live it out well. If I consider my original decision a bad one and I am free to change it, then I pray for God's help to know what and when to change. For instance, I might be coming to the end of an unhappy period in temporary vows, or I turned out to be a poor clinician. The Ignatian Exercises generally offer a fine context in which to pray and come to a decision about what to do.

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## The Individual's Election

These four dynamics have no separate existence of their own. They enjoy no reality apart from individual human persons in groups and associations and societies. They are altogether subjective, as we humans have actually taken them into our own selves, both unconsciously and preconsciously, both with awareness and deliberately. They function within and among us, not separate like gears in an engine, but overlapping like the four seasons. They overlap because we humans are complex and we overlap in our own ideals, consciences, behaviors, and associations.

I think, though, that each of us comes to live principally within one or other of these four dynamics. Think of Mother Teresa and Archbishop Romero; of Idi Amin and Rev. Jim Jones, of Dag Hammarskjöld and Gandhi; of Jimmy Dean and Elvis Presley. At least, I think, we are drawn to live more and more out of, within, and toward one dynamic. At times we can sense which of the dynamics we are living within, and at other times we hesitate. We grow slowly into our leading dynamic and indeed continue maturing into it all of our lives.

In view of this, you can see how a person would slowly let the Holy Spirit lead him into Christlike, patiently growing in perspective and ways of seeing life, in desires and habits. You can also see how deadly sin works: A man chooses one step at a time to live more and more

fully out of the dynamic of sarx and then out of the dynamic of darkness, until he lives the embodiment of the lie. We have witnessed some magnificent examples in our lifetime of men and women who have grown Christlike, and some terrifying examples of men and women who have enacted the dynamic of darkness and who grew into the people of the lie.

But it would seem that all of us take into ourselves some movement and measure of each of these four dynamics. We who are baptized into Christ surely take on His life, but we know what a struggle we go through trying to put on the mind of the Lord Jesus. Those men and women who are the most noble human servants will also show the weaknesses of the flesh. The person given over to the lie may until death feel something of the desires that rise out of noble humanity and out of Christ's universal salvific grace.

And I would presume that individuals would display patterns in growing from one dynamic to another, or in maturing in one leading dynamic while struggling to diminish the force of another in their lives. Surely we have all met women and men who serve Christ and fight against sarx. We know people who are wallowing in senseless sarx who look for someone to help them figure out how to get out of the quagmire. Priests have been approached by people leading truly evil lives, who come to tell their story though they do not really know why.

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## The Discernment of Spirits

Here precisely is the reason why we need to discern spirits. We need to ask of each significant action and of every deep and persistent desire: whence and whither? Does this desire proceed truly out of Christ's life in us, and does its enactment deepen Christlife? We will find out what God hopes for us and in us not only in the desire, but in the enactment, and in the consequences of the enactment. Discernment requires attention to all these stages.

Did another desire come out of the dynamic of sarx? Does my habit of burning candles before the saints come truly from Christ's Spirit of joyful trust in God, or partly from the flesh's givenness to voodoo and magic? Has my trust in

God been filtered through and diminished by the proneness of sarx to insecurity? Do I contest with God in the fierce determination to have control, a process that flourishes deepest in the dynamic of the dark?

This is the basic question in discernment of spirits: Does my desiring rise from the Spirit of Christ, or from one of the other dynamics? Am I moved by the Spirit of Christ? Am I moved by the spirit of fallen flesh? Am I moved by the spirit of noble humanity? Am I moved by the spirit of the lie?

Hence, discernment does not mean finding out what I feel. It means finding out what I desire and out of what dynamic I desire it, what I enact and what I intend by my enactment. These are the "spirits" that I discern. ♦

## Discernment in the *Spiritual Exercises*

Iñigo makes two important distinctions in his Rules. The first we have already looked at: He distinguishes the person who is going from one sin to another from the person who is trying to serve God steadily.

You need to note here that this sinful person might be living in the main out of any dynamic. He or she might have made a serious commitment to Christlife, perhaps some years ago, and now be suffering from a serious habit of sin. Sometimes a deeply religious person will go into the Exercises and discover that a suspicious habit is indeed seriously sinful.

Again, he or she might be living in the main within the dynamic of noble humanism, or within the dynamic of sarx. I suppose you could figure out characteristic sins for the four dynamics; I have not tried. Surely, exercitants who have been living out of humanism tend to prideful self-sufficiency and commonly in the Exercises discover their dependency on God in Christ. And those who live within the dynamic of sarx tend to skate on the surface of their relationship with God or to give themselves to sexual irresponsibilities.

You need also to note that a person can be living sincerely in the Christlife dynamic and yet live aware of sinning pretty steadily. One of the truths more humiliating to our humanity is this, that Christ saves us out of our sin. He does not make us yet sinless, as the Cathari would contend and those who claim the general resurrection has already taken place. He summons us out of the chaos of our sinfulness, slowly and in His own time.

The second distinction Iñigo makes has to do with the condition of the interior life. He distinguishes between the condition of consolation and the condition of desolation. His own notes are very clear, if very compact, and you would want to read them many times [316, 317]. In the terms of the four dynamics, you could read those notes in the following way.

Consolation. I live strongly and contentedly within the chosen context of my life. Before all, I live in faith and in hope. I feel no fear whether I may be destroyed by those elements in my context that I inherited; I feel no doubt whether I have been deceived into choosing a context that will fail me. I see with the eyes of faith, hope, and love; and my Christian perspective makes sense to me. I can readily perceive God's glory in the world, and God's working in my own self. Without giving it much thought, I see the works of the dark as utter folly and vacuous. Overall, I desire the good and the holy, and I want to love God in everything and everything in God. I am not at this time extravagantly drawn to the sinful, particularly not to the sins of the flesh like gluttony. I find it relatively easy to make decisions, and continue making good decisions well. I go along my habitual ways in peace, not finding any more than the usual problems in keeping the good resolves I have made and the good habits I set myself to.

This is "consolation." With it, ordinarily, comes a great sense of well-being. We feel good when we are in consolation, for the most part. But the feeling is not the consolation and ought not be trusted entirely. The ease and sureness in living out Christlife's dynamic is the consolation.

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*Discernment in the Spiritual Exercises*  
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Desolation is everything the opposite. I get restive within my context, whether chosen or inherited. I may feel disgust with the Church or with my career, and dislike the good things that I truly enjoyed just a day ago. I find myself thinking Christlife somehow illusory, or at least my living in Christ somehow an illusion. I feel drawn rather to the perspective of humanism (if I am living a virtuous life) or of *sarx* (if I am living a not-so-virtuous life). I want to see results, and I want things to be easy and pleasant. I want comfort. I find my perspective dramatically shifting, and God seems far away. Less good actions and things, even sinful actions and things, loom large in my perspective now. I find myself struggling to make good decisions and perhaps faltering in keeping up my good habits.

This is "desolation." All the while, I may feel perfectly fine, perhaps even very good. But generally, when I get into a desolation, I feel

downcast and discouraged and even depressed. Here, too, the feeling is not the desolation. You do a great favor to the person who is struggling to get out of sinful habits by pointing this out to her, and warning her that she will sooner or later both feel down and suffer true desolation.

One of the more important norms in Ignatian discernment requires that we separate the feelings of consolation or desolation from the true consolation or desolation. This flies directly in the teeth of our culture, which tends to trust that what you do does not matter as much as how you feel about it. Christlife poses the opposite norm, and the discerning heart knows that what you do is what matters, and what you feel emotionally may safely be relegated to a definitely secondary place.

These two distinctions—between those who go from one sin to another and those who are struggling to serve God, and between consolation and desolation—lead us finally to Iñigo's norms for discernment. In this treatment, I will use both the language I have been developing and also Iñigo's language. ♦

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## The Rules for the Discernment of Spirits

You discern in order to find out what God hopes for you in your life at present. You can serve this same purpose in two other ways. First, you can have the directly religious experience of simply knowing surely what God hopes for you, without any doubt, as Iñigo explains in his paragraphs on the times of making a correct and good choice of a way of life [175]. And again, you can have the deeply human experience of quietly pondering alternatives, seeing pros and cons on both sides of a choice, and coming to decision with sureness, as Iñigo explains in what he calls "Making a Choice in the Third Time" [178-188].

The "Second Time" proceeds in the ruckus of human affectivity, when alternatives attract and repel and feelings run high or dry up without much rationale. In this "time," a person acts very differently when he is sinning and when he is living a good life.

When a man goes from serious sin to serious sin, embracing greed, enjoying lust, giving rein to envy, the Spirit of Life casts the light of reason on the wretchedness of what he is doing. It raises the sting in his conscience and leads him to remorse. As one such person said when he finally listened to Christ's Spirit, "I must be crazy to keep doing this." For such a man, the spirit of the dark or of sarx proposes plain and manifest pleasures, trying to keep the man steady in his serious sin. As another man said, yielding to sarx, "I don't really see any problem with what I'm doing," and could not for the life of him figure out why he was experiencing desolation both in feeling and in fact.

When a man embraces a good life, things go the other way around, obviously. The Spirit of Life consoles, encourages, inspires, removes obstacles, and makes doing good easy. The spirit of the dark or of sarx will harass him with anxiety, afflict him with sadness, and try to make him feel desolate. To cast this into the

language we have been using of the dynamics: The man who starts or continues trying to lead a life of continuing conversion in the dynamic of Christlife will find excellent help in that dynamic by the pure gift of his Creator and Lord. He will find the context he has chosen—say, a warm fellowship in cursillo or a well-structured RCIA program—full of meaning and very empowering. He will relish the new perspective he feels invited to take, perhaps of God working busily in his life. He will see things newly, perceiving God's glory where before he saw something much more mundane. He will be moved by vivid and holy desires, and find himself making decisions readily. He will feel it easy to develop habits like attending cursillo reunions or doing the spiritual reading for the RCIA. All of this the Spirit of God typically grants to the person electing Christlife.

Of course, he could meet some stiff obstacles rising from his former givenness to the dynamics of humanism and sarx (and of course, worse ones from the dynamic of the dark, if he had been given to that). Presume that he has turned away from a life given to the emptiness of sarx. He cannot merely walk away from the way he had been choosing to live as though that way were a computer program that he simply turns off. No person chucks habitual ways of thinking, desiring, deciding, and enacting; we change ordinarily more slowly. So, when the former dynamic takes hold of him, he will find himself sliding back into the context of his sinful life, for instance, in a bar or a covey of riotous friends or through magazines. He will find himself tempted to go back to the perspectives that he had before—seeing every decision from the perspective, for instance, of the pleasure it will bring him or deprive him of. His desire to trust God and love Jesus Christ will wither under the fire of his desire for former pleasures, and his ability to make good decisions will be damaged by the many bad decisions he has been making.

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The fact is that we all experience times when the dynamics that we are giving ourselves to get stronger instead get weaker. Even a pianist pursuing fame with ferocious passion has off days and off weeks. Is it worth all this? she might moan. In this process we call discernment, we see this pattern of alternation with the eyes of faith and hope and love of God, recognizing that the pattern can take us to God or away from God, depending on how we handle it.

How are we to handle it? Iñigo urges several norms [318-321].

*The Rules of the First Week [313-327]*

When a woman trying to leave behind a life given to the dynamic of sarx (or grow beyond humanism) gets into a real desolation, she needs to follow these norms: She should change no decision that she has reached in an important matter. She would do very well to intensify her spiritual activity and pray more and insist with herself that she keep the disciplines she had entered into in the dynamic of Christlife (say, generosity toward others or keeping her silence in certain situations). She needs to remember that the same Spirit of Christ who creates her in consolation creates her in desolation, and the same Power guards and leads her. She also needs to keep the common-sense consideration in mind that, as she was once in consolation before her present desolation, so she will again be in consolation. She will not always find it hard to desire to love and serve God, or feel the confusion she now feels. She does not need to imagine how she is failing or faltering; rather, she simply needs to endure, learning patience and long-suffering, which in point of fact belong to the cycle of Christlife.

It will help a great deal to recall that, even when we are in serious desolation and confusion, the dynamic of Christlife continues to hum

along in ourselves. After all, Jesus Himself felt desolation and confusion. The truth seems to be that, for some of us, tremendous growth takes place within and as we move out of true desolation, just the way new knowledge takes place only upon occasion of genuine confusion.

She will wonder, Why am I feeling such desolation when all I am trying to do is serve God?

Iñigo suggests three very cogent reasons why God the Lord would let her go through desolation: First, perhaps she was truckling with other dynamics, slackening in her decision to live the dynamic of Christlife, and perhaps praying less seriously. Second, perhaps the Spirit of Life hopes to clarify in herself that the Christlife dynamic does not hum along without contamination of the other dynamics. Perhaps she feels vain about choosing Christ; perhaps she has splinters of superstition in her service of God; perhaps she still fears God inordinately. God the Lord would raise within her own person the forces to purify her givenness to the dynamic of Christlife—one of which would be desolation. And third, God must be faithful to Self and help us know that the entire dynamic of Christlife comes in us as gift. We cannot earn it. We cannot demand it. We are the recipients of "the free gift of his grace by being redeemed in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24). Especially in our day, Americans have an inborn conviction that we have the right to live exuberantly happy and healthy; we inherit so much and so freely that, like mindless rich heirs, we tend to think that we have a right to all of this.

Two ways of acting are important to the person who is turning from the dynamics of sarx or of humanism to live out more fully and wholeheartedly the dynamic of Christlife.

First, he needs to be entirely resolute from the start. If he wholeheartedly embraces context and perspective, he will see things differently and will keep desiring what he wants to desire. And if he enacts his good desires, he will develop ways of acting that confirm him in his new context and sharpen his new perspective. And so on. This wholeheartedness is what Iñigo re-

fers to in Annotation Five, and you would want to watch for it as a director.

And second, he needs to take responsibility for his own desiring, as far as he is able and therefore responsible. Iñigo puts this in terms of toying with temptation [325] and of raising to high visibility any desiring that draws him from the dynamic of Christlife [326]. Iñigo's reason is that the spirit of the dark works in secret, and we could add that the spirit of sarx loves secrets, too, and glosses over hard truths. Even humanism has to finesse certain realities. Only Christlife goes forward entirely and utterly in the light, in complete consciousness. Only in the dynamic of Christlife can a man take full responsibility even for his desiring.

### *The Rules for the Second Week*

Iñigo presumes that the woman who has indeed moved into the Second Week has elicited the wholeheartedness of Annotation Five and has given clear evidence of a commitment to the dynamic of Christlife. For her, note certain realities:

She will find that when Christ moves her, she moves in peace, joy, wholeness, and clarity of meaning. On the contrary, when she is moved by another dynamic than Christlife, she will move promptly into disturbance, restlessness, and testiness.

If she starts following long streams of reasonings and convoluted threads of logical analysis, she is probably being tempted to shift away from Christlife.

Her temptations, in fact, will ordinarily come under the guise of good—a long explanation of why she used to fall into a certain sin, an unusual perspective on Mary's virginity. The further she moves into commitment to Christlife, the further removed from blunt wickedness her temptations. It's fairly obvious: A woman who has been consciously and successfully developing the habit of speaking good about others will

not be tempted by some scabrous gossip nearly as much as she surely was before developing her Christlike habit.

But the important point is that those who consciously choose Christlife will be tempted onto other dynamics by the good in them, the evil in them going at least disguised. Be very clear, however: She will be truly tempted and truly liable to give herself again, or more, to the perspective of pleasure in sarx or to the perspective of great human good in humanism.

She will learn a great deal about her own spirit if, when she finds herself unfaithful to her commitment to Christlife, she follows the development back to the point—some good thought, desire, act—where it began. A rather frequent situation of this kind rises when a person decides to start praying in a "higher" or "better" way than she has been praying. She might take up Teresa of Avila and try to enter into contemplation. I have noted that more than one person has started with that grand resolution and ended praying much less than she had prayed before. Any time a good person has mistakenly let go of something good and consoling in her life, a discerning director would try to help her follow that back to its origin. There, she and the director are likely to find evidence of one of her principal weaknesses.

As a good person moves along in his interior life and keeps intensifying the dynamic of Christlife in himself, the Spirit of Life moves gently, delightfully, and courteously, simply able to act like God's true Self with this compliant person. The spirit of sarx and of the dark moves much differently—vehemently, aggressively, causing disturbances.

But when a good person starts getting slothful and careless, then the Spirit of Life takes strong action and evokes tedium, remorse, and fear. The spirit of sarx and of the dark would, of course, elicit comfort with the slothfulness and carelessness.

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Sometimes, for no reason and without any warning, the Spirit of Life will seize a person and fill him with consolation. You can trust such a consolation completely. The obverse of this is important. When a vivid consolation has a specific cause, the discerning director will want to keep an open mind whether the consolation comes from the Spirit of Life or from the spirit of *sarx* or humanism or even of the dark. It is easy to believe in God's benevolence while sipping Cutty Sark—it is not always easy in such a case to know from which dynamic the belief rises.

When a man is experiencing strong consolation, he can make a decision, even an important one, and expect that he has made a good choice well. So, when he lives easy in the context he has chosen, and that context and his perspectives all

make excellent sense to him; when he finds God easily every day; when his desires are strong and consoling; when he decides peacefully and clearly—he has made a good choice and has chosen well. The discerning director will notice something about such a situation, however. A strong consolation feels very good, principally because it is the way we are meant to live, and we do not like to feel it slipping away. Consequently, we have a tendency to try to hold on to such a consolation when we feel it diminishing into what Iñigo called “the aftereffects,” typically by coming to fresh decision. Such a decision is suspect, plainly, because though it may be a good decision, it is not well made, since it is most likely to be made for the sake of getting back the consolation. As Iñigo ends, these decisions “must be carefully examined before they are given full approval and put into execution” [336]. ❖