

THE IGNATIAN CONSTITUTIONS AND THE GIFT OF DISCERNMENT

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THE USUAL STARTING POINT for understanding the discernment of spirits in Ignatius' thought is either the text of his *Autobiography*, or else the more systematic presentation in *Spiritual Exercises*. This book's Rules for the Discernment of Spirits (Exx 313-336) and its instructions for making a choice of a way of life have become spiritual classics (Exx 169-189).

The approach to discernment which starts from the Jesuit *Constitutions* is less well known and less well researched. Yet here we have a real treasure trove of information. The *Constitutions* do not develop any systematic account of discernment, but they do show how discernment can be practised in the decisions of everyday life. Here, then, we shall take the text of the *Constitutions* as our point of departure. This will allow us to give a coherent overall picture of the various aspects and details of the discernment process which are to be found in Ignatius' earlier experiences.¹

Textual Analysis of the *Constitutions*

We can start by looking at the text of the *Constitutions*. One's immediate impression is that there is not much to be found there on the topic of discernment. The phrase 'discernment of spirits' occurs on just one occasion, in the list of qualities to be looked for in a General of the Society. Other phrases, too, which belong to the 'classical vocabulary' of discernment of spirits—one thinks of words such as 'impulses', 'consolation', 'desolation', 'good spirit', 'evil spirit', 'temptation',

¹ On the genesis of the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, see Leo Bakker, *Freiheit und Erfahrung. Redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen über die Unterscheidung der Geister bei Ignatius von Loyola* (Würzburg: Echter, 1970). A Spanish translation is now available. In English, there is some discussion of Bakker's work in Philip Endean, 'Discerning Behind the Rules: Ignatius' First Letter to Teresa Rejadell', *The Way Supplement*, 64 (Spring 1989), 37-50.

'deceits'—are seldom or never to be found; and when they do occur it is usually the case that their particular meaning is simply taken for granted on the basis of what is said in *Spiritual Exercises*.

There is, however, an exception to this generalisation: the family of words linked to 'discernment' (*discreción, discernir, discretio, discretamente*). The 55 occurrences of these words in the *Constitutions* enable us to make a first approach to the understanding of what discernment means. Take, for example, what is said about one of the most difficult problems in the government of the order: under what conditions may even a professed member of the Society be dismissed? We are told that 'the charity and discretion of the Holy Spirit will indicate the manner which ought to be used in the dismissal.' (II.3.A [219]) Ignatius is here indicating, precisely and clearly, that discernment is a charism, a grace given by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 11:10). In the end, '*discreción*' becomes possible only because of the workings of God's grace in us; even if we already have all the human talents and dispositions necessary, it is grace which brings them to maturity (I.2.6 [154]). At one point, in connection with the novices' poverty, Ignatius even speaks of 'holy discernment' (III. 1.25[287]).

The word 'discernment' is very often used in connection with superiors in the Society of Jesus; they should possess a sound gift of discernment, and their judgment in very many practical questions should be decisive. Other office-holders also should be chosen with this requirement in mind; the rector of a college is to choose as his consultors persons 'in whose discretion and goodness he has much confidence.' (IV.10.7[431]) Another aspect of discernment is emphasized when Ignatius is speaking of the co-operation between superiors and subjects. On the one hand, Ignatius is confident that any professed Jesuit will allow himself to be led by discerning love (*discreta caridad*) in their everyday spiritual practices. But on the other hand, the superior has the last word and can determine the circumstances in which the decision ought not to be left to the judgment of individuals (VI.3.1, A [582-583]).

Of course, a decision like this, made by a superior about someone in his charge, must be backed by his own inner experience, his own inner movements (*mociones*—Exx 313).² These 'movements' provide as it were the basic data for the discernment, on which all further clarification depends. So, in listening to the account of conscience, the superior should

² In his guidelines for the Discernment of Spirits, Ignatius often speaks not of 'spirits' at all, but rather of 'movements'. He is referring to any kind of movement that can occur in the human soul: moods, feelings, hopes, reflections, plans, dreams, or whatever—anything that can cause movement within the person. To learn discernment means to pay attention to what is moving me and what it is moving me towards.

receive the fullest account of the inclinations and motions of those who are in his charge, in order that he can on this basis find the most appropriate apostolic mission for them. (*Examen* 4.35[92]) Conversely, the subject being sent on a mission should in obedience put himself entirely at the disposition of his superior, though of course he retains the freedom to bring to the superior's notice any of his own movements and thoughts (*mociones o pensamientos*) which lead him to the opposite conclusion.

This first look at the *Constitutions* in terms of the 'classical concepts' of discernment does not yield a great deal. A second look focuses on the final end of human beings as it is set out in the book of the *Exercises*. We human beings throughout our lives should 'desire and choose only 'what is more conducive for us in view of the end for which we are created', namely, 'to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord and by so doing save our souls.' (Exx 23) We should use every means 'to seek and find the divine will as to the disposition of one's life for the salvation of the soul' (Exx 1).

If we look in the *Constitutions* for the processes of clarification and discernment which will lead us to this goal of the *Exercises*, we find an incredible richness. Amid this enormous abundance of material, two linguistic forms in the *Constitutions* are particularly revealing as regards the very *structure* of the discernment process. The first of these is the many comparatives, for instance, the repeated use of 'more'; the second is the constantly recurring formula 'in our Lord'. These we must now present more fully.

The Ignatian 'Magis'.

The classical Ignatian comparative is the word 'more' (*magis* in Latin, *más* in Spanish). This occurs more than 550 times in the *Constitutions*.³ One could cite as an example the sentence from Part III concerning the Novitiate, in which 'more' occurs five times:

It will be especially helpful to perform with all possible devotion the tasks in which humility and charity are practised more; and, to speak more in general, the more one binds oneself to God our Lord and shows himself more generous toward his Divine Majesty, the more will he find God more generous toward himself and the more disposed will he be to receive daily greater graces and spiritual gifts. (III.1.22 [282])

In the use of 'more' and of many other comparatives—particularly striking are 'greater' and 'better'—the discernment process is always

³ Indeed, within three paragraphs of the key chapter on mission, VII.1, the word comes up 49 times (VII. 1.D-F [622-624]).

related back to the goal for which we are created. If we bear in mind also other expressions that suggest an intensification of our orientation towards God (for instance, ‘promote’, ‘help’, ‘increase’, ‘support’) we can find in almost every sentence further invitations to spiritual discernment. The *Constitutions* are not so much a book of rules in which it is clearly laid down what has to be done in each situation; rather, like *Spiritual Exercises*, they are above all a handbook to help us to find God.

Admittedly, the *magis* is often misunderstood.⁴ In our western culture we are inclined to think of ‘more’ in terms of economic growth, or greater achievement. In such a context, the *magis* becomes a call to actualise one’s full capabilities and previous successes in the realm of intellectual or social or economic status. ‘Increase your profit margin!’ is the current slogan of a large German bank. But this version of the *magis* is in the end self-centred. By contrast, Ignatius’ ‘more’ is completely centred on God, on Christ. Something is truly ‘more’ or ‘better’ or ‘greater’ if it contributes to the glory and service of God and leads us to become more Christ-like. This is the key to the discernment of spirits. Ignatius guards against such misunderstandings at the end of the rules for Election, where he formulates his basic principle:

... let each one think that they will benefit themselves in all spiritual things in proportion as they move out from within their self-love, self-will and self-interest (Exx 189).

‘In Our Lord’: Shorthand for ‘Discernment of Spirits.’

A second structurally significant expression, indicating the pivot on which everything else turns when it comes to understanding discernment as it appears in the *Constitutions*, is the formula, ‘in the Lord’.⁵ In many passages, after a long discussion of whatever question is being considered, it appears at the end like a refrain: ‘... as will be judged more expedient in the Lord’,

⁴ Leo Zodrow has drawn attention to how the Vulgate translation into Latin of the Principle and Foundation involved a serious and momentous error. Whereas the Spanish spoke of what was *more* for the praise, reverence and service of God, the Latin said simply ‘to choose and to desire what leads to the goal’ (*ea, quae ad finem ducunt, eligere ac desiderare*). Here the *más* has been left out, with the result that the whole dynamic of discernment and election breaks down. And for 400 years, the Vulgate text was taken as normative. Zodrow goes so far as to conjecture that this translation mistake might have been connected with the strongly ascetical and moralistic interpretation of the Exercises that prevailed for some centuries until quite recently. See his “Prinzip und Fundament”: Eine ignatianische Kurzformel für den Vollzug des geistlichen Lebens’, *Geist und Leben*, 58 (1985), 175-191.

⁵ The word ‘Lord’ (*señor*) is used approximately 400 times in the *Constitutions*. Of these, around a quarter (94) involve formulations such as ‘in the Lord’ or ‘in our Lord’ that imply an event of spiritual discernment.

or ‘in accordance with what the occasion offers and what seems in our Lord more profitable and suitable to the persons’ (*Examen* 4.6, 14 [60, 69]). ‘In our Lord’ can seem a mere pious formula, one that the reader can easily overlook. True enough, it is a habitual turn of phrase for Ignatius. Nonetheless it sums up very concisely the method of discernment, with the result that within the *Constitutions* we can regard the phrase as an Ignatian shorthand for the discernment of spirits.

When he is dealing with difficult or fundamental issues, Ignatius often puts things somewhat more precisely and carefully. Thus, to justify requiring the account of conscience he says:

After pondering the matter in our Lord, we consider it to be of great and even extraordinarily importance in his Divine Majesty that the superiors ... (*Examen*, 4.3.5 [92])

The doubled phrases emphasize how it is a spiritual discernment process. Or again, the introductory sentence of Part II of the *Constitutions* which deals with dismissal from the Society:

... just as there should not be excessive readiness in admitting candidates, so even less to dismiss them; instead, one should proceed with much consideration and pondering in our Lord. (II.1.1 [204])

What does his use of ‘in’ mean in this context? What kind of relationship does it express? Here are some other expressions Ignatius uses: ‘binding oneself to Christ our Lord’ (*Examen*, 1.E [17]); ‘familiarity with God our Lord’ (X.2[813]), ‘desires in the presence of God our Lord’ (VII.4.3 [638]), ‘service to Christ our Lord’ (VI.2. G [566]). These expressions are all easier to understand than ‘in our Lord’

The key is given by Ignatius in the foreword to the *Constitutions*. There he speaks of ‘the interior law of charity and love which the Holy Spirit writes and imprints upon hearts’ (Preamble 1 [134]). In Ignatius’ view this interior law takes precedence over every ‘exterior constitution’. The mutual indwelling of God and human beings is made possible by the gift which the Holy Spirit lays down in the human heart. With the ‘interior law of charity and love’ comes an interpenetration of human and divine action.⁶ This corresponds exactly to the concluding meditation of the full Exercises, in which the person making the retreat should,

⁶ For more on this, see Erhard Kunz, “Bewegt von Gottes Liebe”: Theologische Aspekte der ignatianischen Exerziten und Merkmale jesuitischer Vorgehensweise’, in *Ignatianisch. Eigenart und Methode der Gesellschaft Jesu*, edited by Michael Sievernich und Günter Switek (Freiburg: Herder, 1990), 75-95.

... look how God dwells in creatures ... and so in me ... making a temple of me, being created to the likeness and image of His Divine Majesty. (Exx 235)⁷

All commentators are agreed that 'temple' here means 'temple of the Holy Spirit', echoing what Paul says: 'Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?' (1 Corinthians 3: 16).

Looked at in this light, the phrase 'in our Lord' has its theological roots in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit is to fashion and prepare that inner space in us where we can live 'in our Lord.' It is no coincidence that it is only at the end of *Spiritual Exercises* that Ignatius writes 'God dwells in me'. Before reaching this point, those who make the Exercises have had to walk the way of conversion to the very end; and as they have proceeded, they have had to meditate on the life of Christ so as to take on his likeness. That activity is their contribution: to prepare room for the Spirit to work in them. Otherwise they would run the risk of illuminism, of which Ignatius was several times accused before the Inquisition.

A brief digression. It is noticeable that in *Spiritual Exercises* Ignatius refrains from speaking explicitly of the working of the Holy Spirit in the human soul.⁸ This reluctance to apply the theology of the Trinity to the *Spiritual Exercises* is conditioned by historical circumstances. When in 1526-1527 Ignatius first gave Exercises in Alcalá de Henares, he soon came to the notice of the Inquisition.⁹ He was suspected of being a follower of the *alumbrados*, who were accused of illuminism, the conviction that the human soul is the recipient of direct and irresistible inspirations from the Holy Spirit. Despite the fact that he was acquitted in every one of several trials before the Inquisition, Ignatius lived under a cloud of suspicion right up until the founding of the Society in Rome.

For this reason, Ignatius was extremely careful in the way that in *Spiritual Exercises* he speaks of the work of the Holy Spirit in the human soul. The words 'Holy Spirit' appears only in contexts where nobody could possibly object: he speaks of the Church being guided by the Holy Spirit

⁷ For a still clearer formulation of this interpenetration, see Ignatius to Borja, late 1545, in Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings*, translated and edited by Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (London: Penguin, 1996), 160-163, here 160-161: '... when persons go out of themselves and enter into their Creator and Lord, they enjoy continuous instruction, attention and consolation; they are aware how the fullness of our eternal Good dwells in all created things, giving them being, and keeping them in existence with His infinite being and presence'.

⁸ See Bakker, *Freiheit und Erfahrung*, 300-305.

⁹ See *Autobiography*, nn. 57-63, 65.

(Exx 365); and the mysteries of the life of Christ rely on biblical models (Exx 263, 273, 304, 312). Even in the Rules for Discernment of Spirits, Ignatius speaks of the ‘good’ Spirit or of the ‘good’ angel, but never of the Holy Spirit. However, despite ‘concealing’ the Holy Spirit in this way, Ignatius’ theology remains unambiguous:

It belongs only to God our Lord to give consolation to the soul without preceding cause, for it is the property of the Creator to enter, go out and cause movements in the soul, bringing it all into love of His Divine Majesty. (Exx 330)

By contrast, in the *Constitutions* and also in the letters written after the approval of the Order, Ignatius becomes much freer in speaking of the work of the Holy Spirit. In support of this point, we may cite three further passages. In Part IV’s chapter on the pastoral formation of those preparing for ordination, it is suggested that the young Jesuits should be prepared for ministry within many different cultures and social strata. This requires a considerable facility in apostolic discernment, and the students must be prepared as well as possible. But Ignatius is clear that ultimately,

... this can be taught only by the unction of the Holy Spirit, and by the prudence which the Lord our God communicates to those who trust in his Divine Majesty. (IV.8.8 [414])

Again, when speaking about the choice of people for particular missions, Ignatius asserts that in the end,

... it is the supreme providence and direction of the Holy Spirit that must efficaciously bring us to make the right decision in all matters. (VII.2.F [624])

Finally, in the very nuanced rules for the election of a new General. (IX.6 [694-710]), we find an astonishing passage, in which Ignatius unambiguously permits—ignoring all the careful arrangements for the conduct of the congregation—a new General to be elected by acclamation. He invokes the idea of a community being ‘inspired’ (*con común inspiración*), alluding thus to a highly suspect idea, and he grounds his claim by saying:

... for the Holy Spirit who has moved them to such an election supplies for all procedures and arrangements. (IX.6.5 [700])

The theological and ecclesiological claim being made here is nothing short of dramatic.

Acts of the Understanding and Acts of the Will

Ignatius divides the processes of spiritual discernment ‘in our Lord’ into ‘acts of the understanding’ and ‘acts of the will’ (Exx 3). His assumption is that when God is not clearly guiding our soul through experiences of consolation and desolation in any one direction, then these ‘natural powers’ can still lead us to a good discernment and choice (Exx 177).

In the *Constitutions*, the ‘acts of understanding’ in connection with the discernment of spirits are evoked in terms such as the following: ‘reflection in our Lord’ (*Examen*, 4.34[91]), ‘proceed with greater knowledge and clarity in the Lord’ (*Examen*, 8.1[130]), ‘since reason teaches us so in the Lord’ (Preamble, 1[134]), ‘what he judges in the Lord’ (I.1.4[143]), ‘reasons which move us in the Lord’ (I.3.2[164]), ‘come to know them better in our Lord’ (I.4.1[190]) ‘Instead one should proceed with much consideration and weighing in our Lord’ (II.1.1[204]) ‘to be considered in our Lord’ (IV.3.1[333]). There are only examples. Ignatius is here referring to the intellectual and spiritual powers of judgement on which he elaborates, by way of giving an example, in his account of the requirements for the General (IX.2.6[729]). The inspiration of the Holy Spirit is not an alternative to rational reflection; the influence of the grace of the Spirit and the human powers of judgement cooperate with one another. It is above all in this spirit that the *Constitutions* were written, ‘since the gentle disposition of divine providence requires cooperation from his creatures’ (Preamble, 1[134]).

The ‘acts of will’, as Ignatius understands them, include not only conscious decisions, but all the appetitive powers of a human being taken together. Included, therefore, are feelings, inclinations, intentions and wishes—everything which today we might classify as human motivation. At the beginning of *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius emphasizes that for someone who is praying through the exercises, acts of will demand a greater reverence (Exx 3). The reason why this is so important is that acts of will are concerned with bringing one’s own will closer to that of God. Everyone feels that great care is required when claiming that this or that is the will of God; the most we can do is with great reverence suggest that something corresponds more closely to the will of God.¹⁰ When he writes about the decision to accept someone into the Order, he puts it like this: Everyone should choose a way of life which ‘seems more conformable to His divine will’ (*paresciére más conforme a su divina voluntad*) (II.3.7[226]). Though he maintains all due reverence and caution, Ignatius is nevertheless convinced

¹⁰ Another indication of this caution comes in the heading for the Discernment rules (Exx 313), where Ignatius speaks of perceiving and dealing with the spirits ‘in some way’ (*en alguna manera*).

that a person can bring themselves into conformity with the will of God. And this is because he is prepared to envisage human ways of behaving 'through which one proceeds in conformity with the Spirit' (VIII.1.8 [671]).¹¹

If a person is to attain this kind of harmony and union with the will of God, they need to be striving for 'a continuous increase of integrity and virtues and urgent desires in the Lord' (*Examen*, 4.41[98]). 'Desire in our Lord' is a shorthand formula for the feelings and acts of will which reach out towards God in the process of discernment. Shortly afterwards, Ignatius even speaks of 'ardent desires in our Lord' (*deseos así ençendidos en el Señor nuestro*) (*Examen*, 4.45[102]). The process of making the Exercises consists of a series of stages in which a person's desires, longings and wishes are brought into ever closer conformity with Christ. In each exercise this appears in the third prelude, 'to ask for what I want and desire' (*lo que quiero y deseo*).

Ignatius describes those motivational powers which are not in conformity with Christ as 'disordered affections' (*afecciones desordenadas*). An essential precondition for finding the will of God in one's own life is 'to rid oneself of all disordered affections' (Exx 1). An example of this is the requirement mentioned in the *Examen* that a candidate for Orders should divest himself 'of disordered love for relatives' (*Examen*, 4.2[54]). The central affect of a human being, love, can thus be either well-ordered or disordered:

When he says 'disordered dependence', Ignatius means that nobody should be influenced by an attraction or a distaste for any person or thing which would be an obstacle to being free to choose whatever is more for the service and glory of God. Such attractions or distastes tend, instead of this, to lead to misguided decisions or attitudes, or to intentions that are not pure.¹²

The most precious text about discernment of spirits, affections and acts of will comes in part III of the *Constitutions*, for novices:

All should strive to keep their intention right, not only in regard to their state of life but also in all particular details, in which they should

¹¹ In this context, William A. Barry speaks of being 'in tune with God's intention': *Allowing the Creator to Deal with the Creature* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1994), 79-81.

¹² Franz Meures, 'Sich frei machen von allen ungeordneten Anhänglichkeiten: Ein interdisziplinärer Beitrag zur Anthropologie der ignatianischen Exerzitien', *Korrespondenz zur Spiritualität der Exerzitien*, no. 50 (1985), 2-69, here 9. In Spanish, see also Luis María García Domínguez, *Las afecciones desordenadas. Influjo del subconsciente en la vida espiritual* (Bilbao: Mensajero, 1992).

aim always at serving and pleasing the Divine Goodness for its own sake and because of the incomparable love and benefits with which he has anticipated us rather than for fear of punishments or hope of rewards, although they ought also to draw help from these also. They should often be exhorted to seek God our Lord in all things, removing from themselves as far as possible love of all creatures in order to place it in the Creator of them, loving him in all creatures and them all in him, in conformity with his holy and divine will. (III. 1. 26[288])

The first sentence emphasizes that our ability to set our goals (*intención*) should be directed clearly and unwaveringly towards God for His own sake. In so doing it says what kind of God it is to whom we should direct ourselves: a God who anticipates us with divine riches, divine love, His incomparable benevolence. Our fundamental relationship to God is thereby established: a relationship in which we receive, a relationship of trust and gratitude inviting us to respond to God's goodness in kind. Here we have the rich basis for the true *magis*.

In the second sentence, Ignatius goes on to explain how well-ordered love—a love which is ultimately directed towards God—makes it possible for us to find God in all things. Of course our natural love of creatures, which is so often intertwined with disordered inclinations, must be purified too. Only when too is directed towards God is it transparent, *discreta caridad*. Only then can it turn once again towards creatures.¹³ It is in this purified sense that Ignatius understands the basic relationship of the Jesuit Generals to his Society: 'charity and love for the Society in Christ our Lord'. (IX. 6. A [790]). Ignatius incorporates this experience of purified love into his definition of spiritual consolation: when the soul 'can in consequence love no created thing on the face of the earth in itself, but in the Creator of them all' (Exx 316).¹⁴

The Mystagogy of Discernment: Three Dimensions of Attentiveness.

In the light of the basic types of spiritual discernment which we have so far developed, we can now see how Ignatius approaches discernment as a spiritual journey. What are the most important signposts which an individual or a community can follow in order to set themselves more clearly and surely on the way to God?

¹³ See further the extensive study by Hans Zollner, *Trost—Zunahme an Hoffnung, Glaube und Liebe. Zum theologischen Ferment der ignatianischen 'Unterscheidung der Geister'*. (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 2004). This contains a comprehensive and up-to-date bibliography on the theme of discernment of spirits.

¹⁴ See Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998), 214-216.

Ignatius directs the attentiveness of whoever wants to make spiritual progress consistently and unwaveringly in three directions:

- 1) One's attentiveness should at all times be clearly focussed upon God.
- 2) One should be very attentive to the states of affairs and events around one.
- 3) One should accord one's own interior movements and thoughts the careful attention which they deserve.

Only the harmony of these three levels of attentiveness will lead to a good discernment.¹⁵ I shall explain them one by one.

Attentiveness towards God

This attentiveness—as is clear from what has already been explained—is an indispensable requirement for finding clarity 'in the Spirit'. In this connection, Ignatius speaks of 'the means which unite the human instrument with God and so dispose it that it may be wielded dexterously by His divine hand.' (X.2[813]). The overall concern is that God's revelation and self-communication should become ever more present and effective within us.

The classical Ignatian way to achieve this is the Spiritual Exercises—though of course anyone genuinely seeking God can make progress in the discernment of spirits without specifically making the Exercises. The Exercises as a whole amount to one way of directing one's attention wholly towards God. The starting point is the basic creaturely decision, expressed in the Principle and Foundation, to praise, reverence and serve God; and the culmination comes in the Contemplation to Attain Love.

The dynamic of the Exercises as a whole involves a continual ebb and flow in which, along with an increasing closeness to God, there emerges also the human being's shadow-side and contrary impulses.¹⁶ When anyone in the light of the truths of revelation (which correspond to the Principle and Foundation) is truly seeking God, they will discover the opposing strength of sin and an inclination to turn away from God. This happens typically in the First Week. In the other three weeks, our attentiveness to God is focussed on God become human. The person making the Exercises

¹⁵ See Franz Meures, 'Was heißt Unterscheidung der Geister?', *Ordenskorrespondenz*, 31 (1990), 272-291.

¹⁶ Erhard Kunz develops this theme in 'Bewegt von Gottes Liebe', 90-92, under the heading, 'God's Struggle against the Powers of Evil and the Process of Discernment of Spirits'.

prays earnestly for a 'knowledge from inside of the Lord, who for me has become human, that I may more love and follow him' (Exx 104). In prayerful meditation, the person follows the whole life-journey of Jesus in order to become more like him.

Ignatius sums up this loving attentiveness to Jesus Christ at the end of chapter 4 of the *Examen*, where the candidate for the Society is presented with the image of the 'livery of Christ' which he should long to wear. He emphasizes.

... to how great a degree it helps and profits in the spiritual life to abhor in its totality and not in part whatever the world loves and embraces, and to accept and desire with all possible energy whatever Christ our Lord has loved and embraced. (*Examen*, 4.44[101])

Even in this striving for a radical following of Christ contrary forces make themselves felt. The 'mortal enemy of our human nature' (Exx 136) wants to turn the person making the Exercises away from the way of the Lord, this time using the more subtle methods of trickery and deception. Ignatius appends to the Exercises two sets of Rules for the Discernment of Spirits which should help the person not to lose their bearings amid the fluctuations of the search for closeness to God and the forces which militate against that search. (Exx 312-327, 328-336). Time and again he uses the image of a battle. Attentiveness to God is not to be had simply by wishing for it. The search has continually to be renewed in the face of many confusions and the hostile fire of the enemy.

Attentiveness to external facts and events

Discernment of spirits is a process whereby one gradually shapes the reality of one's life in the light of God's revelation. Hence a careful attention to the facts and realities of life is an essential precondition for good decisions in the spirit of the gospel. And precisely on this point Ignatius shows himself to be a hard-headed realist. In the course of his own life he has become highly suspicious of pious wishes and commitments which bear no relation to the real world.

But it is the *Constitutions* which illustrate this Ignatian reality-principle most fully and vividly. Time and again, we meet a formula that comes up like a refrain:

... the circumstances of the persons, times and places should be the means of judging whether it ought to be made or not (II. 4. C[238]).

This constant reference to the reality principle make the discernment of spirits a matter of constant process, since the circumstances of place, time and persons are themselves in constant change.

There is a very good example of this in the practice of obedience. On the one side, Ignatius points out that the will of God comes to expression in the mission and direction of the superior:

... everyone of those who live under obedience ought to allow himself to be carried and directed by Divine Providence through the agency of the superior ... (VI. 1. 1[547]).

On the other hand, Ignatius praises a member of the community who clearly disregarded the superior's order because the circumstances of the place were not what had been expected. Ignatius comments:

A human being issues the order: but it is God who gives discernment (*discretionem*). I want you ... to act without scruple, according to how you will judge what is to be done on the basis of circumstances as they actually are, the rules and instructions notwithstanding.¹⁷

Further examples from the *Constitutions* illustrate the Ignatian reality-principle. When describing the process that begins with the acceptance of a candidate into the Society and concludes with his definitive incorporation, Ignatius provides a nuanced set of criteria and procedures. He is, after all, very well aware that the choice of suitable persons is absolutely vital for the healthy development of the Society. Again, when he is dealing with the making provision for where, how and with whom the Society should exercise its mission, he runs through the whole gamut of persons, times and places as if to give us an example (VII. 2. 1, A-K [618-628]). Moreover, Ignatius also states that if the General in Rome is to be able to arrive at good decisions for the Society worldwide, he needs accurate information and appraisals of what the local situation really is. For this reason, regular letters are to be sent to Rome from all parts of the world (VIII. 1. 9, L-N [673-676]).¹⁸

Finally we should remember that when a person is making the Exercises, they are meant to be paying careful attention to places, persons and circumstances even when they are making biblical contemplations on scenes from the life of Christ. For in the incarnate Christ, in whom the divine will has become an accessible 'public event' at a definite time in

¹⁷ Testimony from Olivier Manare, MHSJ FN 3, 434.

¹⁸ See two letters from Polanco (on Ignatius' behalf) to the whole Society, 27 July 1547, MHSJ EI 1, 536-549.

human history, the exercitant finds a kind of touchstone that enables him or her to test each spiritual decision they make as they follow Jesus on his path.

Attentiveness to Interior Movements and Thoughts.

The third important focus of attention in connection with discernment is our ‘interior events’—that is to say all the movements and thoughts of which we are conscious. The quiet and seclusion of the Exercises should help to foster attentiveness to these interior events. The entire enterprise of the Exercises is based entirely on the assumption that the person will subject their movements (*mociones*) and thoughts (*pensamientos*) to the most vigilant scrutiny and discernment. (*con mucha vigilancia y atención mirar y discernir*) (Exx 336). The Rules for the Discernment of Spirits are essentially concerned with the varied succession of movements and thoughts which can arise within the soul on its spiritual journey.

It seems so obvious that every one is aware of their interior movements and thoughts. However, this is by no means the case. Even spiritual persons often have gaps in their self-understanding and self-awareness. Fr Jan Philipp Roothaan SJ, General of the Jesuits in the early nineteenth century shortly after their restoration, wrote on the Rules for Discernment:

It is noteworthy that these rules are useful not simply for understanding or being discerning about the movements of one’s soul, but also for promoting those feelings and that awareness itself. How many people there are who have not even once felt the movements of their soul—that is to say, have been aware of or conscious of them.¹⁹

The interior movements are in a sense like sounding-boards which resonate when provoked by anything interior or exterior of which we are aware. Hence they include the entire content of both the other two dimensions of attentiveness. An exterior event gives rise to interior reactions—for example, to a feeling of joy or of sorrow; and a gaze fixed upon the crucified Christ can produce a veritable avalanche of feelings and thoughts (Exx 53).

Spiritual consolation and desolation can be very good indicators of whether someone’s interior strengths are accurately tuned to the reality of God which they are contemplating at the time.

¹⁹ Johannes Roothaan, *Die Geistlichen Übungen des hl. Ignatius nach der spanischen Urschrift*. (Regensburg 1855), 304-305.

For Ignatius, consolation means the central inner experience in which one can feel a living relationship to God, the Creator and Lord. A person consoled has come into contact with God in a lived and felt way, and finds in this experience of God a spiritual orientation, together with growth in faith, hope and love.²⁰

It is when someone is moved by this spiritual resonance that they are ready to make decisions about spiritual things. Ignatius calls this the 'second "time" of Election',

... when enough light and knowledge is received by experience of consolations and desolations, and by the experience of discrimination between various spirits (Exx 176).

When the process of spiritual decision-making is to take place in a group or a community,²¹ the notion of 'interior movements' has an additional dimension. 'Interior' no longer refers only to the consciousness of an individual but also, and at the same time, to the collective inner life of the group, to what one might term the spiritual and psychological group-dynamic. This makes the decision-making process considerably more complex. The shared means of communication within the group have to be organized in such a way that the movements affecting individuals as well as those affecting the group as a whole can all be owned by everyone.²² And yet, as mentioned above, there is also such a thing as a 'common inspiration' (*Constitutions* IX.6.5 [700]).

Looking in the Jesuit *Constitutions* for what they say about the discernment of spirits is a very fruitful undertaking. In this text, decision-making processes are seen to be rooted in real problems and actual facts. This reality-principle does not cripple spiritual energy in advance; rather it is precisely what fosters it. One senses that the greater the experience people have of life's hard challenges, the more Ignatius is prepared to trust God's

²⁰ Franz Meures, 'Jesuit Corporate Identity: Promoting Unity and Cohesion in the Society of Jesus', *Review of Ignatian Spirituality*, 89 (Autumn 1998), 23-40, here 23.

²¹ The classic case of this is, of course, the so-called Deliberation of the First Fathers. See Jules J. Toner, 'The Deliberation That Started the Jesuits: A Commentary on the *Deliberatio primorum patrum*', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, 6/4 (June 1974).

²² On this, see Franz Meures, 'Geistliche Prozesse in Gruppen', *Korrespondenz zur Spiritualität der Exerzitien*, no. 69 (1996), 3-31; 'Unterscheidung der Geister in Gruppen: Eine Übertragung der Regeln zur Unterscheidung der Geister auf Gruppenprozesse', *Korrespondenz zur Spiritualität der Exerzitien*, no. 68 (1996), 25-37.

action in them. Careful attentiveness to interior movements provides in this context a setting in which one can see whether people are hardening their hearts under the grip of the enemy of human nature's grip, or whether it is God's own goodness and humility at work in them. This is what Ignatius has in mind when he repeatedly stresses that something has to be clarified and decided 'in the Lord'.

Ignatius's view of an individual's discernment of spirits can be summarised as follows. Discernment of spirits is a process of clarification, undertaken by someone who is seeking for God and has a personal familiarity with Christ, in which they assess the external situation in which they are placed, and the interior feelings which they experience: are they being led closer to God, or further away? When that has been done, they are in a position to take decisions about their life which will set them more firmly on the way towards God, as well as decisions about the other 'things on the face of the earth' (persons, organizations, possessions, strategies and so on) through which, just as much through spiritual processes, the greater service and praise of God can be achieved. And something similar, *mutatis mutandis*, can be said about group discernment.