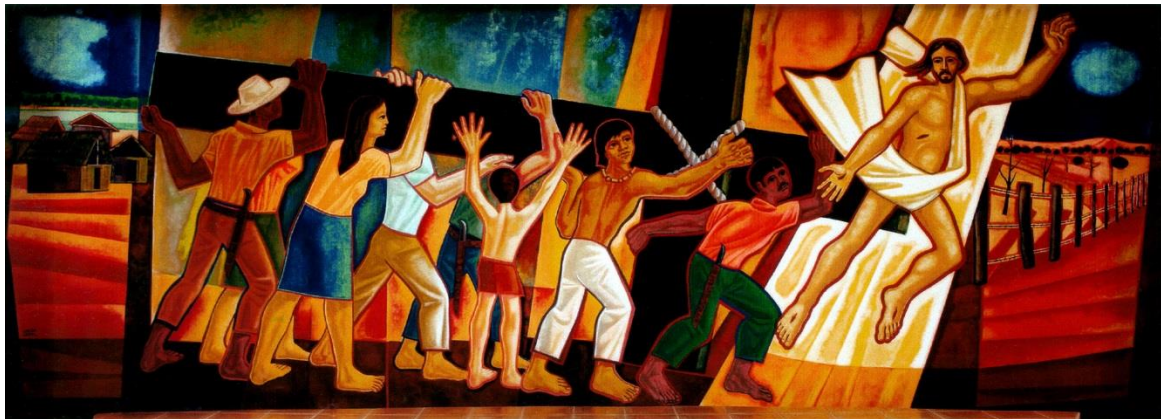


DARING TO LET OURSELVES BE CARRIED

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DARING TO LET OURSELVES BE CARRIED¹²

Discerning is not easy. We have all in one way or another experienced two very typical extremes in this regard: there are those who do their utmost to complicate the meaning of discernment—making it into something only for the already initiated—or those who readily baptize almost any reflection or discussion with the name “discernment.” Both stances have done much damage. Discerning is difficult. The difficulty consists in establishing not only an appropriate methodology but also the necessary conditions. One key condition is being in contact with real poverty and struggling against it. Being involved in the struggle of poor people becomes a “condition of possibility” as well as a “criterion of verification” of Christian discernment. Discernment is born of taking a position alongside the Jesus who is poor and humiliated today (the requirement) and leads to defending his cause (the verification). Only in those conditions and with those fruits can there be true discernment.³

Discerning involves entering into the mystery of the Will of God. There is nothing more alien to discernment than being certain about one’s own judgment. In principle, we discern in order to seek the will of a God who is mystery, a God whose ways are not our ways, and this is obviously something that must be felt. Discerning is not seeing clearly but being docile enough to be led by the impulses of God, along ways that we often do not understand.

Discerning also presupposes certain human qualities: it presupposes a human “*subiecto*”⁴. Discernment will be difficult for persons who do not have an understanding and merciful heart, for those who cannot forgive, for those who are incapable of loving and being loved. Such persons will have great difficulty in placing themselves in a discerning frame of mind, for discernment is also a fruit of human maturity. At the same time, however, discernment requires some profoundly Christian attitudes. In Ignatian-style discernment, the choice is not between the good and the bad; rather, it is deciding what is “better” (the concrete *magis*). The criteria are those presented in the “Two Standards”⁵; the goal is the “third way of being humble.”

This essay consists of three basic sections: the methodology of discernment, the daily examen, and a postscript.

The first part is concerned more with the methodology of discernment than the theory of discernment. It begins by explaining how discerning involves real “daring,” but a kind of

¹ I am very grateful with Jorge Morales, for the revision and edition of this article.

² Traduction from de first Spanish edition in journal *Diakonia*, special inssue, Nicaragua, September 1987

³ Cf. GC 33, no. 41.

⁴ This term *subiecto* (translated to subject) is used by Ignatius Loyola to indicate a person who is physically and psychologically healthy.

⁵ The meditation on the “Two Standards” (the standard of Jesus and that of the Enemy) presents two contradictory strategies for evangelization. The meditation, placed by Ignatius at the heart of his book of Spiritual Exercises, is his version of the alternatives that the Synoptics present as crucial for Jesus in his temptations.

daring that has had four centuries of being translated into practice, starting from Ignatius Loyola and from the Gospels themselves. This section begins by speaking of the origin and development of discernment; then follows a crucial study of two spiritual “times” (Ignatius calls them “weeks”), for each of which there is a special process for discernment of spirits. We stress the importance of identifying the “time” in which a person is and the “direction” in which the person is moving. Immediately after that we offer a comparative study of the action of the Evil Spirit (ES), which will throw light on the ways in which the ES can be detected and defeated. This involves explaining another key element for discernment: understanding what “desolation” is, knowing how to struggle against it, and making the best of the moment of consolation. Because of its effects, consolation is pragmatic: it is a gift for collaborating with the labors of God’s reign.⁶ We conclude this first part by saying something about the “confirmation” of discernment, that is, the need for the discernment to be ratified in history and in one’s own life.

The second part of the essay proposes a concrete way of making the daily examen from a pedagogical perspective. This way of making the examen helps us to understand discernment as the fruit of the confrontation between “spirits”; it also helps us to distinguish between consolation and desolation, and thus grow in fidelity to the God who is always greater. We begin this second part with the practical difficulties of the examen, placing emphasis on what the examination of conscience *is not*, in order to explain what it *should be* and what its objectives are. We end, as we said, by explaining what the practice of the examen reveals to us about discernment itself, and also by indicating a crucial requirement: the discovery of what we will call the “maxim.”

The third and final part of the essay contains a postscript, in which we show that our attitude of daring, as risky as it may appear, can arise only out of our own weakness and from the impulse of God.

⁶ Cf. 2 Cor 1,3-7, which inspired Ignatius.

FIRST PART: THE METHODOLOGY OF DISCERNMENT

1. DARING TO LET OURSELVES BE CARRIED

As will become clear in the course of these comments, discerning is simply “letting ourselves be carried” by the Lord. Nevertheless, if we analyze carefully this “letting ourselves be carried,” we see that it is an act of great daring.

Discerning is daring as regards freedom; it demands a daring freedom. Freedom is not a blind force but is always founded on the reasonableness of things. In the spiritual life, however, freedom has to be audacious. In this regard, we should remember one of the most significant terms used by Saint Paul to designate the freedom of Christians: *parrhesia* (Eph 3,12), which means “bold speech”. What identifies true Christians is their daring freedom. Christian freedom is bold, but the greatest boldness of all is “letting ourselves be carried.”

The daring freedom required by discernment invites us to proceed blindly along paths where human reason is unable to follow. Freedom can help us to proceed with certainty to what we think is prudent or simply to what our will desires. In the case of discernment, however, a daring option is made: we freely choose to go where we do not see clearly, to go where we are carried. In doing this, we are reliving the experiences of Ignatius Loyola who, while still a novice in spiritual matters during the months after his conversion, was carried to where he knew not. “Ignatius was following the Spirit, not rushing ahead of it, and so he was led gently to where he knew not” (Nadal, cited by Arrupe, *Identidad del Jesuita*, 409. Sal Terrae, 1981).

Discernment involves *daring* because it presupposes the support of God, a God who has given the first impulse and who can therefore be trusted—here is the “audacity”—to keep giving unlimited impulses. Discernment involves *daring* because in some way it commits God to keep working in each one of us; it takes for granted that God will keep intervening.

The greatest boldness of discernment derives perhaps from the fact that the vital terminus of the movement that impels us—the Spirit’s action in us—is nothing but the cross, in one or another of the many forms it takes in history. It is not the cross of false asceticism but the cross that comes from an alliance with the God who dwells in the midst of the people. It is therefore a cross which unites us with those who are suffering and with the fate of the poor. Moreover, discernment involves *daring* because it exposes us directly to the conflict-filled currents of history, and it invites us to decide for the primordial option of God himself: the cause of the last and the least.

But if discerning means “letting ourselves be carried,” then it also means discovering the force of the God and the force of evil in ourselves. We must know their range; we must know where they are based; we must know the tactics they use; above all, we must recognize our personal reactions in the face of both good impulses and bad.

Discerning means deciding, but only after clarifying the fields within which we move (Two Standards).⁷ Discerning is not choosing between good and evil—that’s what the commandments are for. Discerning means choosing the most effective means, that is, the means which places us in the ideal spiritual disposition of “letting ourselves be carried to the point of placing ourselves with the Son on the cross” (Three Classes of Persons). Discerning means keeping our eyes on Christ Jesus, who dies and rises and who calls us to collaborate in his mission, a mission which has its own logic: death that brings life. Discerning therefore always means advancing toward the “third way of being humble,” perhaps without ever being able reach it, but still forcefully impelled toward wherever the Lord is carrying me.

Discernment is clearly a personal process, but for validity it still needs to be assayed by someone with “ecclesial authority.” As Ignatius explains in his life story, this was something very important, and it is instructive also for us. Ignatius always insisted that discernment attains full validity only when it is ecclesiastically accepted, as we can see from his encounter with the Franciscan sentry in the Holy Land (*Autobiography*, no. 40) and his profound commitment to the “fourth vow.”⁸ That is why the exercitant needs to be advised by someone else, at least by his/her guide through the exercises.

Discernment means discovering the action of the Spirit who is already moving us. But the Spirit moves us always within a larger ecclesial context, which confirms and ratifies what we have discovered in our inner depths, or which otherwise warns us away from it and urges reconsideration.

Obviously, there are different types of discernment. For example, there is *personal* discernment, which involves the choice of a state of life or a radical reform of one’s life during a month of exercises; there are also the many everyday choices appraised during the daily examen. There is also *shared personal* discernment, in which we can share before a group of “friends in the Lord” what we are experiencing and discerning. There is also *community* discernment, which aims to discover what the Lord is asking of a specific community and in what direction he is leading the common life. Finally, there is *apostolic* discernment, which is deliberation about what needs to be done practically in our ministry in order to prepare for the Kingdom of God in history.

Each of these types of discernment has its own methodology, though ultimately they all converge. Apostolic discernment, for example, should be preceded by an informed technical and scientific exposition of the situation in which action is to be taken; such analysis of the reality should be presented as carefully and critically as possible. Personal discernment is not so much in need of this type of methodology. It is important

⁷ Here reference is made again to the famous meditation on the “Two Standards,” which is key to understanding Ignatian discernment (cf. SpEx 136ff.) since it established the polarity involved in the following of Christ. The meditation on the “Three Classes of Men” (SpEx 150), for its part, evaluate one’s readiness to follow Christ and to choose the most effective means for doing so. The meditation on the “Three Degrees of Humility” (SpEx 164) seeks to evaluate one’s willingness to understand and embrace ever more radically the following of Jesus.

⁸ This is the special vow of obedience made to the Pope by professed members of the Society, in addition to the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. It commits them to following the Pope’s desires or “missions.”

to note, however, that both cases—the procedure for seeking the best means to the desired end, and the sifting of one’s personal feelings to detect the movements of the “spirits”—can be judged by the same well-known Ignatian rules of “discernment of spirits.”⁹

2. ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF IGNATIAN DISCERNMENT

As we have said, “letting ourselves be carried” requires daring. In order to let ourselves be carried, we must be able to recognize the Spirit. The “act” of “letting ourselves be carried” does not happen in an ambience of hushed tranquility, but rather in an arena of noisy conflicts and contradictory interior movements. We experience diverse impulses, often opposed to one another. The Lord and the “spirit of this world” are battling for our freedom.

That is why it is important to have rules and criteria that help us perceive the (openly or stealthily) contradictory aspects of the good spirit and the bad spirit. For this, Ignatius offers us his rules, which are practical rules that were formulated over many years and based on Ignatius’ own personal experiences and apostolic ministry. As Ignatius wisely points out, the rules demonstrate only the “ordinary” behavior of the spirits, that is, the way the good spirit and the bad spirit act *ut solet, ut in pluribus* (313-336).¹⁰

The experience that gave rise to these rules dates back to the days when Ignatius was convalescing in Loyola. There he not only discovered the world of interior movements, but he also learned to decipher them and to discern their final goal, that is, where they were leading him. In this way he began to deduce spiritual principles regarding the different impulses that reveal either the good spirit or the bad spirit (*Autobiography*: 7, 8, 20, 21, 25, 54, 55).

We are best able to understand that the rules are not just a more or less orderly collection of pious recipes when we actually put into practice, especially during the month-long exercises. But we can get a preliminary understanding of the rules by seeing how they work in the meditation on the “Two Standards,” which offers an unbeatable paradigm.

In the “Two Standards” not only are we instructed to ask for the grace to receive “insights into the deceits of the evil leader and the help to guard ourselves against them” (139), but we are also urged to request the grace to forge an alliance with the Lord during the colloquy, that is, the dialogue with which the prayer ends (174).

⁹ For Ignatius the term “spirits” can refer either to the Holy Spirit, who moves human hearts to make the memory of Jesus the Lord present in history, or to the “Enemy.” This latter can be understood either in a personal way—as the spirit of evil, the angel of darkness, the “father of lies,” the “murderer from the beginning”—or in an impersonal way: as the inner essence of “this world,” that is, the spirit of selfish accumulation, the pursuit of prestige, the desire for power, or the feeling of prideful superiority based on race, ethnicity, personal traits, social factors, etc.

¹⁰ The numbers in parenthesis will refer to the text of the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius.

In this way it becomes evident that discerning involves not only discovering and distinguishing the spirits but making concrete choices. Discerning is choosing (313).

Perhaps one of the most brilliant features of this meditation is the way it points towards the “Babylon” and the “Jerusalem” that exist in the life of every person.¹¹ The meditation invites us to become aware of how both the good and the evil spirit become real in our world through diverse social relationships, including economic, political, and even affective relationships. They are forces external to us, but they gain a certain “access” to us through our previous sins and pacts with evil, as well as through our previous following of Jesus.

All discernment, if done well, will lead to the downfall of the “Babylons” and to the raising up of “Jeruselems.” This whole battle is at one and the same time the *fruit* and the *prerequisite* of the petition of the colloquy (147), as paradoxical as that may sound.

In the “Two Standards” Ignatius speaks of the ploys of the evil spirit (ES). It is well to remember that the ES invades and exploits the psychological wounds of our past personal life, and it exacerbates the temperamental weakness of our specific human condition. The ES can vary its mode of attack according to whether we are in the first or the second spiritual time. But the tactic of the ES will be to “set up snares and chain,” that is, to cover up its strategy and make it attractive by appealing to the desires and passions of each person. The direction of these tactics of the ES has a well defined trajectory (“where it is taking me”), as Ignatius makes clear: it moves from riches to vainglory, and then to power and pride, and finally to “all the other vices.” Each person has to discover the actual steps by which the ES, using tactical temptations of either the first or the second spiritual times, causes continual disruption, whether in the short or the medium term.

With regard to the Good Spirit (GS)¹² Ignatius offers a corresponding pattern. First of all there is the basic scene of “Jerusalem,” the bastion of the Spirit’s action in us. Then comes the analysis of the spirit’s movement which, it is important to note, can also ride on our wounds, not to reopen them and make them bleed more, but rather to stanch them and heal them. This “remedial” activity clearly reflects one of the most significant activities of Jesus of Nazareth during his historical mission. But the movements¹³ of the GS, unlike the ploys of the ES, do not act only on the field of our wounds. There are also countless other “movements,” graces, or impulses, some of which are experienced, according to Ignatius, as arriving in the “heart without previous cause” (330). We would

¹¹ In proposing his meditations, Ignatius places importance on what he calls the “composition of place.” This involves picturing a scene related to the meditation or contemplation so as to make use of the resources of the human imagination so that it can serve God’s communication with the human heart. For Ignatius the biblical resonance of “Babylon” made it an apt image of the strategy of the Evil Spirit. Similarly, he used the image of “Jerusalem” to symbolize the strategy of the Spirit of the Father and of Jesus.

¹² The Good Spirit (GS) refers to the Holy Spirit.

¹³ Although Ignatius uses the term “movements” for the impulses of both the GS and the ES, it seems to us more pedagogically advantageous to distinguish them linguistically as “movements” (of the GS) and as “ploys” or deceptions (of the ES).

venture to say that this type movement has no connection with any wound or with any human weakness previously experienced.

Regarding the “tactics” of the GS, we would transpose the key moments in Ignatian spirituality. In the General Examen¹⁴ Saint Ignatius presents the ideal—“The Three Ways of Being Humble”—to the candidate for entrance to the Society of Jesus, and the candidate is asked whether he already “possesses such salutary and advantageous desires.” Obviously, such desires are not born of one’s own efforts; if a person has them, it is because the Lord has so disposed the person. When such an attitude does not exist due to “our human weakness and miserable state,” Ignatius would have the person asked further: whether he at least “desires to have such desires.”

So the path of action of the GS is first of all to have a “desire for desires.” In a second moment it is to attain the attitude of “I wish and desire, and it is my deliberate decision,” as expressed in the meditation on the Kingdom (98).¹⁵ The third and final moment is asking to “be placed” with the Crucified Son—the “The Third Way of Being Humble” (167).

These are the usual tactics of the GS, quite different from the “snares and chains” of the ES. We emphasize here the role played by “desires” in Ignatius. Desires are among the movements that he values because they are a type of “attraction” having to do with our being passionate about our very being. However, while all our desires are real experiences, they are not all equally authentic. The authentic desires are those which are related to our own identity; they are the ones that come to us from God, the ones we are here calling “movements.” These movements are also to be judged by “where they take us.” If they take us toward greater generosity and commitment, if they move us toward more radical following of Jesus, if they motivate us to be more detached, then they are clearly a gift of God. We come to understand that in the life of the Spirit it is not we who take the initiative in our desires; it is God. If the desires move us to “let ourselves be carried” to wherever the Spirit is in fact directing us (the *maxim*¹⁶), then we clearly have to accept them and work with them. It is in this way that we advance in the life of the Spirit. Interestingly, the “desire for desires” is a clever device Ignatius uses to help clear away any contrary feelings we may have in opting to following Jesus. It is like a first step. Also, when we have fallen into desolation or have neglected our life in the Spirit, recalling the “desire for desires” that we formerly had is a way to begin again.

If discerning means choosing, then the fundamental choice to be made is that of letting ourselves be carried wherever the power of God is moving us. This spiritual phenomenon (the *maxim*) is specifically expressed in the meditation on the “Three Classes of Persons” (see note 6), which is the most effective means for being placed

¹⁴ Reference is made here to the General Examen proposed for candidates to the Society of Jesus. This magnificent text with profound Jesuit roots presents the ideal of a wholehearted following of Christ in total poverty, to the point of surrendering one’s life (*Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, 101, 102).

¹⁵ This is the central meditation of the “Second Week” of the Spiritual Exercises; it is the first meditation of that week.

¹⁶ We call “maxim” the principal movement, the one in which all the others flow together. The maxim indicates the way by which God has always led us and promises to keep leading us. It can consist of a word, an image, a concrete experience, or a combination of any of these.

under the banner of Jesus. What we call the “maxim” is the mediation of the Spirit, who by the Father’s desire recreates the features of the Son in our own existence. This means that discernment can be understood only in the light of the Trinity.

Ignatius provides us with a concrete method for discernment in his Autobiography and especially in the central meditations of the Second Week. The most important elements in the process are the following:

a) Describing accurately what I experience.

It may be a movement of peace, of tranquility, of delight; it may be a desire, an interior joy, or their counterpart; it may even be an illumination, a profound understanding, an insight from within, or their counterpart.

b) Detecting the direction or the path.

That is, perceiving “where I am being carried” by the movements or ploys.

These first two criteria are the principal ones.

c) Knowing where these experiences are lodged.

* Are they in our “Jerusalem” or our “Babylon,” the two bastions that produce either movements to arouse us or ploys to attack us?

* Are they in our personal wounds and weaknesses, or in our exaggerated ideals?

d) Taking note of our reaction to the movement.

Understanding the role of freedom in accepting or rejecting the movement or the ploy.

e) Taking into account the spiritual times.

* Being able to contrast the moments of the day (the past) with the moment of the examen (the present) in order to open ourselves to the future.

* Using the “before” of the “maxim” as a centering criterion for the discernment of spirits and for the time of desolation.

f) Knowing in what stage of the spirit we find ourselves.

Ignatius describes two stages, which he calls the First Week and the Second Week and which we in this essay call “epochs.”

g) Knowing very precisely the activity of the ES.

Ignatius dwells extensively on the activity of the ES in his “rules” for the discernment of spirits. The tactic of the ES is diametrically opposed to that of the GS, whether it is attacking with arms of the first epoch or with those of the second.

Ignatius explains all these various aspects in his presentation of the rules. Rather than comment on the rules themselves, we will attempt a synthesis that will help us not only to understand them but to use them for the discernment itself.

3. THE EPOCHS AND THE PATHS OF THE SPIRIT

Saint Ignatius speaks not of epochs but of “weeks” because he sees a sort of correlation between the process of the First Week of the Exercises and the rules he assigns to that week, and likewise for the Second Week.

In discussing the rules, we have thought it advantageous to refer to “epochs” instead of “weeks” in order to avoid confusion. For one thing, the separation between the spiritual

times is not always so mechanical—not even in the Exercises. Similarly, in our daily life it is not always easy to know whether one is in the first or the second “week” when one considers, for example, the themes for our prayer (such as sin or the life of Jesus).

What is more, the two epochs are often intermingled in such a way that a person can be experiencing at the same time situations and temptations typical of both of them. That is why it appears to us more advantageous to call these spiritual times “epochs.”

We will use the term “epoch,” then, to refer to the different ways that the ES may attack a person: whether blatantly (first epoch) or stealthily (second epoch). This is the basic criterion that establishes the limits of separation, according to Ignatius.

But the concept of epoch implies something more: there may be periods of time when various elements prevail that generate a whole.

In its positive aspect, an epoch takes the basic form of a movement by the Lord. An epoch has a profound range, determined by what we have called the “maxim.” Positively, an epoch is distinguished by a basic petition, which is a very distinct grace. Negatively, an epoch takes the form of a temptation or ploy that dominates and shades the spiritual life.

The great subtlety of evil is that it makes the epochs interfere with one another. It can lead a person astray by tempting with first-epoch weapons while fomenting second-epoch ploys. The person may feel that he/she is triumphing over the ploys of blatant evil but at the same time may find that he/she is hamstrung by fallacies and “subtleties” typical of the second epoch.

A typical ploy of the ES is to make the person think that the characteristics of the second epoch apply only during the Exercises—at most—but not in daily life. Such thinking undermines from the start any possibility of uncovering the stealthy deceits of the Enemy.

Saint Ignatius also speaks of a spiritual pre-history (314) which allows us to conceive of three epochs. The first, rooted in that pre-history, would correspond to the person who is going “from bad to worse.” Ignatius spends little time analyzing this case and concentrates mostly on the other two.

The spiritual epochs are therefore determined by the direction in which they point us. The movement can be either immediate or gradual: sinking all at once (first epoch) or undergoing a slow but steady spiritual decline. The epochs are measured not only by the mode of attack but by the direction in which the attack takes us: swift collapse or long-term deterioration. Thus, in considering the “where we are being carried” we should consider the swiftness or slowness of the tactic.

An epoch also includes “spiritual states.” A spiritual state is the mood or disposition of the spirit, which can be defined as desolation, consolation, or tranquil time. To some extent these states depend on the psychological constitution of each person: our

psychic structure may serve as the infrastructure of our spiritual state. While our spiritual state may relate closely to our psychology, the spirit's disposition depends on still another element, one that gives it a properly spiritual dimension. That element relates to the "direction," for that is what decides whether the matter being considered is leading toward the sphere of the GS or toward that of the ES.

Often the spiritual states are produced or are amplified by the impact of biographical or historical realities, which can be either positive or negative and which need also to be "read" in a spiritual key.

The spiritual state can be the vehicle of either a movement or a ploy, depending on the direction it takes. That is why it is important to be able to distinguish something that is simply a biological or psychological sensation from something that by its trajectory either distances us from God and his cause or brings us closer.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE ACTION OF THE EVIL SPIRIT

In his rules for discernment Saint Ignatius offers a detailed analysis of the action of the ES. The strategy of the ES in the first epoch is plainly very different from its strategy in the second epoch. We have already made it quite clear that what distinguishes the two epochs is the form of attack: whether it is blatant or stealthy.

The action of the ES in the first epoch:

Ignatius points out that in this first epoch the ES prefers to attack by means of feelings. Although the ES can also suggest to us "ideas" of base things, it is feelings like sadness and desolation (315) that dominate in this epoch. Various words are used to describe this brazen activity of the ES.

The ES tends to ride hard on unhealed psychological wounds or on temperamental weaknesses that have not been faced. The rules make it clear that the ES does not hesitate to attack us by our most vulnerable side (327). Its action takes advantage of exaggerated reactions¹⁷ that result from our wounds, and it aggravates them in order to establish something like an automatic mechanism. Its activity does not have to be very creative; it simply uses the person's disproportionate reactions to wreak havoc in the

¹⁷ "Exaggerated reactions" are those produced by childhood wounds or traumas. These wounds provoke reactions that are disproportionate to the stimulus but proportionate to the magnitude and caliber of the wound. When wounds are not cured, they always provide abundant material for the ES to work with. Moreover, some persons try by means of asceticism or will-power to overcome certain reactions which do not fall within the moral sphere because they are automatic and cannot be controlled by the will. Only with the healing of our wounds (which requires a period of treatment and, in some cases, professional help) will we have human material, so to speak, that is capable of discernment. The daily examen will help us to see the importance of seeing the relationship between the ploys of the ES and our exaggerated reaction—the result of our wounds—so that we can locate the action of the ES and mute the reverberations produced by certain experiences of weakness.

The Good Spirit can also work with our wounds, but does so in order to cure them instead of opening them up and making them deeper.

spiritual sphere. When not using our wounds, the ES normally attacks us with appalling and shameful images and sensations (317), which draw their force from our human instincts.

Still, as outrageous as the ploys of the ES may be, it will always seek to remain hidden so that our director or confessor knows nothing about it (326). It prepares its attack well, and its attack is swift and devastating; it uses every means to sink us deep into quicksand.

The action of the ES in the second epoch:

During the second epoch the ES must often take on a disguise, arriving *sub angelo lucis*¹⁸ and appearing as a virtuous preacher of the truth. Its strategy now is to dazzle us, not primarily with feelings but with reasons. But the reasons are false or deceptive. Ignatius calls them “specious reasonings, subtleties, and persistent deceits” (329-332), and their job is to take away consolation by means of covert trickery (329). To this end the ES presents things that “in principle” are good in themselves but are not good for us in a specific instance. If we devote time and thought to dwelling on such things, they can discourage us and leave us unsettled (332). The ES manages to ensnare us, not by preying on our “weaknesses” but by exploiting our indiscreet passions, which are mounted on our “exaggerated ideals.” These overblown passions or ideals—which have no way of becoming viable—are the breeding ground for all the ploys of the second epoch, both because of the content of our fervor (based on an exaggerated ideal) and because of the excitement it produces.

THESE ARE SOME OF CHARACTERISTICS OF “EXAGGERATED IDEALS”:

- * They are ploys that make use of something positive, some fine human quality in us. The ES uses the good thing as a disguise, revealing itself *sub angelo lucis*.
- * A tone of “idealism” pervades the whole business since what the ES proposes to us is basically unviable.
- * Paying attention to these ploys makes us waste the present time thinking about the future. What *can* be done right now is not done because we are thinking about what might be done tomorrow.
- * There is a tendency, perhaps veiled, to become judgmental regarding other people’s lives.
- * The final, long-term result is divinization of ourselves; pride radically distances us from the plan God has for each of us.
- * Such “ideals” have the sociological effect of provoking resistance in others rather than inciting them to imitation and following.
- * By their very nature the exaggerated ideals use “discourse” as their vehicle. When they rely on some kind of feeling, these ideals become “indiscreet passions” or “indiscreet fervor.”

¹⁸ Ignatius uses the image of 2 Cor 11,14: “Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.”

Indiscreet fervor has a lot in common with exaggerated ideals, but there are also some differences:

- * Indiscreet fervor makes use of something positive in our personality, attitudes that are good in themselves, perhaps what is best in us.
- * It does not take the form of discourse but rather incites very specific actions and activities.
- * These actions tend to be sudden and abrupt, or they are provoked by “raptures.”
- * Indiscreet fervor makes me a “judge” of others, and it makes me believe that no one can “judge” me. For what I do is exceptional, and no one can really understand it. I have no need consult about it with anybody.
- * Every “indiscreet fervor” has an element of rashness: I think I have more strength to do what I feel passionate about, or I believe that I have great grace from God. However, I fail to discern properly the strength I actually have or the graces I have received—I just take them for granted.
- * The result is that, instead of serving and encouraging others, I wear myself out, and everything ends there.
- * Instead of building up community spirit, I end up stifling it, and I neutralize the good qualities of others. In the worst of cases, I produce a version of hell.

The ES always introduces itself as a consoler, but it provokes states of soul that derive from our psychological situation; it may also toy with the “aftereffects” of the Lord’s past consoling action (336). The ES does not console us but rather usurps consolation and uses it for unworthy ends. Its strategy is not to make us fall immediately; rather, it takes the long view (333), seeking little by little to diminish our interest in the spiritual life. This strategy appears to us to be well founded; in fact, we think it is healing us. As a result, we judge that these “rules” are fine for other persons or other moments, but not for us in the current situation, which is “very real and truly exceptional.”

The ES produces a “noise” when we are living intensely in the spirit. This “noise” is like the splash of a drop of water: it makes us feel that something unseemly is entering into our personal life. It’s like the experience of sensing that some stranger is in the house: we hear strange sounds, perhaps imperceptible at other times, but not for the person whose heart is vigilant (335). This “alarm” can be detected in the daily examen, as when something leaves a bad taste in our mouth. As we advance in our ability to discern, we can even discover the part of our own body which resonates most with God’s voice or with the action of the evil one. This experience of locating the bodily effects of the ploys helps us greatly to discover any forces that are contrary to the action of God and to our own freedom, which now wants to be totally committed to the Lord.¹⁹

¹⁹ Reference is made here to the times when we experience a concentration of the action of the GS in a specific part of the body: it is the part where we always “happen” to feel the movements. In contrast, the influence of the ES—the ploys—are found in another part of the body. The advantage of taking this bodily aspect into account and making it an everyday practice is that it can serve as a contrasting element for the discernment of spirits.

5. THE STRUGGLE AGAINST DESOLATION

Desolation is one of the “spiritual states.” It is an experience that can result from either a movement of the GS or a ploy of the ES. Ignatian spirituality is perhaps different from other schools of spirituality in the way that it incites combat against desolation. Ignatius urges us to “make vigorous changes in ourselves against the desolation” (319), as if he considered it not a “state” but rather a test to be overcome.

Description:

Ignatius states that desolation is “everything that is contrary” to consolation (317). He describes the characteristics of desolation very explicitly in numbers 315 and 317 of his rules. In general, desolation includes all kinds of sadness, worry, anxiety, lassitude, and discontent; it includes feelings of indifference, loneliness, and isolation; it sometimes brings with it thoughts of death or excessive dryness in prayer. It is the spiritual sloth or apathy so often mentioned by the mystics. Ignatius states that “it is characteristic of the evil spirit to cause gnawing anxiety, to sadden, and to set up obstacles” (315). Desolation involves “an impulsive motion toward low and earthly things, or disquiet from various agitations and temptations. These move one toward lack of faith and leave one without hope and without love. One is completely listless, tepid, and unhappy, and feels separated from our Creator and Lord” (317).

Desolation can be present as a ploy that is passing but strong, or it can establish itself and remain with us for a long time. When desolation is a test from God and lasts a good while, it can do much to consolidate the will.

All the traits described here can be measured both as to duration and as to intensity. They can range from what might be called “dryness”—which is sometimes the threshold of desolation—to deeper, more painful feelings and experiences which cause one to lose peace of soul and feel abandoned by God.

Causes:

Desolation appears to have three types of causes: those derive from oneself, those that come from the ES, and those that we would call “tests” coming from God (322).

1) DESOLATION THAT DERIVES FROM ONESELF

Desolation of this sort can come about for psychological reasons, such as ordinary depression or exaggerated reactions due to psychological wounds. Other causes may be simple exhaustion, sickness, or disgust at one own weaknesses and inadequacies. It is important to remember that the ES can take advantage of the most personal aspects of our psychology.

There are also more objective reasons for desolation that are still within the sphere of the personal. A person might be interiorly affected by external factors, such as the death of a friend or tragic events in the world. Such things can provoke a depressed psychological state, which makes a person more vulnerable to the intrusive activities of the ES. The enemy prowls about, looking for weak points to attack (327). Besides these more personal reasons, desolation can also result from our cravings, laxities, or failings in the spiritual life: it results from our being “tepid, lazy, or negligent” (322).

2) DESOLATION THAT COMES FROM THE EVIL SPIRIT

By its nature, says Ignatius, desolation comes from the ES. It is the way the ES typically acts. The ES is “the adversary, the deceiver, the murderer, the enemy of human nature.” The ES is therefore the cause par excellence of desolation, and its goal is to destroy life.

3) THE “TESTS” THAT COME FROM GOD

Sometimes desolation is a test from God, for God is a Father who corrects us and invites us to change and be converted (143-144). The supreme example of desolation is the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane and on the cross. Feeling abandoned by the Father and rejected by all, Jesus cried out in anguish as he descended into death.

Discernment:

How can we tell whether a particular desolation results from personal factors, comes from the ES, or is a test from God? That is where discernment is needed.

We will begin by presenting the elements that allow us to discover the desolation that comes from the ES, since that is the typical kind:

- * Some or all of the elements of desolation as described above are present.
- * It tends to take away our peace of soul completely.
- * We feel devoid of natural qualities: we feel low self-esteem, and we think poorly of others as well.
- * It separates us clearly from our “maxim,” from our dominant movement.

Desolation may be a “test” from God when the following is true:

- * Some or all of the elements of desolation as described above are present.
- * A deeper peace of soul is still somehow felt.
- * We are left feeling that “the Lord has left us to our own powers,” but that God’s grace “always remains available” (320).
- * All the foregoing is true, and there is also a certain invitation to leave “that,” as Ignatius says: “because of their good moral judgment,²⁰ he stings their consciences with remorse” (314).

²⁰ Ignatius uses here the term “synderesis,” which he borrowed from scholastic philosophy; it has the positive meaning of “good sense” or “common sense.”

What we experience in the tests and the way they are presented to us are indicators of the direction in which the Lord wants us to reorient our lives.

Ignatius's own life gives us a good example of how God corrects our direction and invites us to seek him more attentively. He relates in his Spiritual Diary how on February 13 he interrupted his prayer of thanksgiving to the "divine persons" to see if he could quiet down the noise in the next room; after that distraction he had difficulty finding the Lord, for "the persons were hidden from him."

Desolation can be said to come from our personal situation when we see in it some connection with our psychological problems or with some objective factors. Such a "susceptible state" can be used either by the ES to dishearten us or by the GS as a test to strengthen us.

Meaning of the test from God

As we have said, desolation can be a "test" from God, that is, a corrective measure inviting us to conversion and repentance. We will treat now the real meaning of the test, which is often found in the "way" the test is experienced: "the medium is the message."

- * A divine pedagogy can be found in our spiritual lives, which by definition are not ours (for "without me you can do nothing").
- * In the life of the Spirit, all is gratuitous gift, which sometimes arrives and sometimes does not. A gift is not attained: it is requested and received.
- * The test therefore requires that we make our petition with greater fervor and conviction; the body itself takes part in the request.
- * It is like asking someone for a kiss. The kiss is a gift, but if it emerges from a little amorous struggle, it is appreciated more; however, it never ceases to be a request and a "gift."
- * The fruit of the test is the call to conversion. We will know what the test is calling us to by examining the way it is experienced.
- * We feel sorrow for our sins, but this does not make us despair, as Judas did; rather, the sorrow allows us to be reconciled, as in the case of Peter.
- * The test should also be understood as an act of solidarity by which we share in the suffering of the poor and the passion of Jesus (193, 195, 203).
- * The test is the historical setting of our wounds, our weaknesses, and the small pains we suffer in solidarity with the great pain of the world.

Tactics to combat desolation

What can we do to combat desolation? First of all, it is important to state that any action taken should be in accord with the origin and nature of the desolation, whether it is from the ES, from the GS, or from one's own personal situation.

Also, it is necessary to distinguish the spiritual epochs, whether first or second, and carry out the action accordingly.

A) WHEN THE DESOLATION COMES FROM THE EVIL SPIRIT

In the first epoch:

- * Make no changes in decisions made earlier.
- * To the contrary, act against the desolation; do the opposite of what it suggests.
- * Tell your spiritual companion about it.
- * Be patient, knowing that “with the sufficient grace already available you can do much to resist all hostile forces” (324).
- * Have confidence that the Lord has overcome the world and its evil (John 16,33).

In the second epoch:

- * Detect any lessening of faith, hope, or charity. Analyze the vital role of the maxim. Any lessening of joy is suspicious if it is accompanied by “discourses.”
- * Consider how the “reasons” that present themselves have the effect of making you change the attitudes that emerge from the maxim. This consideration can help you detect the presence of a ploy of the second epoch.
- * As Ignatius advises, compare the beginning, the middle, and the end of the discourses (the “speeches”). If any part of them is seen to be not “from God,” it is a sign of the ES.
- * In such cases the best thing is “not to enter into any kind of dialogue with the ES.” Don’t let yourself get involved in arguments that will always confuse you. You should review the “reasons” that are brought forward, but only with the help of your spiritual companion.
- * Remember that it is important to know the personal sources of any “exaggerated ideals” because these ploys will almost always try to exploit them.
- * Spiritual accompaniment becomes the best weapon against such subtleties. It is also helpful to belong to a community where you can do personal discernment in a shared manner.

B) WHEN A DESOLATION IS A TEST FROM GOD:²¹

- * Decode its meaning by recognizing the feelings that are present.
- * Acknowledge from the start that we are helpless: we are alone with only our natural forces. Practice humility.
- * Be exceedingly generous with the Lord.
- * Realize that everything is a gift of God, even desolation.
- * Even more, thank God for leading us this way, for letting us share in his pain, for letting us experience solidarity with the suffering of his people.
- * Start walking in the direction indicated by his “message,” as understood through *the medium* by which the test is presented.

C) WHEN A DESOLATION COMES FROM PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

- * This kind of “desolation” is not desolation as such, but is rather a case of depression, a recurrence of past wounds, or something similar. Nevertheless, true spiritual growth also requires that we grow with respect to these personal factors. If we do not continue to grow, we will be providing the ES fertile soil in which to sow insidious ploys which can often assume, because of our wounds, seemingly unmanageable proportions.
- * Although these personal factors are not desolation as such, the ES can use them to create desolations of its own design. How then should we proceed? We must firmly resolve to recognize and to heal our personal wounds so that the ES is left without any access to our weaknesses, and our own spirit is freer to let itself be carried by the Lord.
- * All this needs to be done with a positive spirit.
- * Try to find out what makes you feel bad, what bothers you most. In moments of confusion, what causes general distress is usually “something nebulous.” By focusing on the feelings, you will see things more clearly and be able to rid

²¹ We have insisted on the need to fight against desolation since it is a state to be avoided. Nevertheless, there are those rare times when God takes away our sense of profound peace and invites us to let go of it. Is there some link here with the tradition of the dark night of the senses that Saint John of the Cross describes? We dare not do more than pose the question.

The experience we are describing does not take us into the field of mysticism. We have simply observed how the Lord can at determined moments ask us to renounce the peace which is his supreme gift and sign. Paradoxically, it is only when the Spirit makes it possible for us to renounce this sublime gift—the condition for living!—that we acquire, so to speak, a peace even more profound and mature.

The historical reason and theological basis that make this renunciation comprehensible is the following of Jesus, who in our contemporary world finds no peace. Our peoples are battered by war, repression, and hunger; they do not “experience” peace. Our solidarity with the poor and with Jesus who is in their midst may cause us to experience pain: the anguish of the absence of peace. Only those who have known what it is to be without peace can understand what it means to ask someone to renounce peace. In such moments only the renunciation itself—with its terrible wrenching—favors the Lord’s desire to restore peace. In these cases the image of the Crucified—both in the life of Jesus of Nazareth and in the life of the Jesus who is present among the refugees and the tortured—is a consoling reprieve. We can be totally certain that the Lord, who is “mystery” for us, will not test us beyond our strength. We can be sure that Jesus has overcome the world and that nobody has suffered as much as he did on the cross. His death and resurrection have given “meaning” to all subsequent suffering and abandonment. We who suffer after him can take refuge in his primal suffering and in his experience of new life.

yourself of disquiet. In this way you will at least learn to live at peace with the problems.

There is nothing that cannot be healed if we have the desire and if we have faith in the Lord who has liberated us and brought us to true freedom (Gal 5,1).

6. USING CONSOLATION TO THE BEST ADVANTAGE

Ignatius's view of consolation was rather different from that of other schools of spirituality. For Ignatius, consolation has a pragmatic, apostolic effect. Consolation is par excellence the "confirmation" that Ignatius insistently requests in order to resolve problems of a historical nature. In the "election" process of the Spiritual Exercises, once the exercitant has considered everything, the most important moment is the experience of confirmation. Consolation, therefore, is something to be made use of, something to be experienced in the manner of the servant who is "dressed for action" and always expecting the Lord (Luke 12,35). For consolation is "the passing of the Lord," which is nourishment for our soul. The Ignatian spirit is basically a pilgrim spirit, one that is always aware that the Lord, if he comes and finds us ready, "will gird himself" and will serve us at the table of consolation once more (Luke 12,37).

Description:

For Ignatius consolation comes about when we feel interior movements that fill us with feelings of generosity, love, and commitment to the Lord. Consolation also includes all the ways in which that profound joy makes manifest the presence of God and his Reign (316).

Causes of consolation:

Apparently Ignatius found no reason to be suspicious of consolation, since all its indicative signs speak of God and his Reign. Nevertheless, being the "master of suspicion" that he was, Ignatius distinguished the various causes of consolation.

A consolation is clearly and evidently from God when it is "without cause" (33), even though there is need to be careful with the subsequent process (336). On the other hand, if the consolation has a discernible cause, then its origin is ambiguous: it may be from God, or it may be an usurpation of the ES (324-331).

We would include within consolation the "tranquil time," which is related to consolation in the same way that dryness is related to desolation: it is a portal, and it may last for a long time. The tranquil time may be caused by or affected by our personal states (our psychological qualities) or by the concrete reality in which we live. The tranquil time is defined by the absence of spiritual movements, but it allows the "natural faculties to be used in freedom and peace" (177).

Consolation without previous cause (330)

There has been much discussion about the precise meaning of this type of consolation, so esteemed by Ignatius.²² Some commentators consider it to be an experience that belongs to the higher realms of the spiritual life, a kind of mystical gift. I do not believe that Ignatius conceived of it in this way, for he speaks of it very simply in his rules. Experience would also lead us to believe that it is something that occurs frequently. We can recognize a consolation without previous cause if the following is true:

- * We cannot attribute the consolation to anything we have done. We would go so far as to say that it is a consolation that does not aim to heal any wound in us but rather enters through channels apart from the healing process.
- * We observe a clear disproportion:
 - between what we have asked for and what has been given
 - between our own efforts (for example, the “points” or notes for prayer) and the illumination received
 - between our ordinary emotional state and the intensity of the devotion felt
 - once the consolation has passed, there is a lowering of “temperature,” which is different from the action of the ES, which makes us languish spiritually
 - most importantly, it increases our understanding of the process by which we are being carried: the “maxim” is stressed and deepened.

Discernment

If a consolation that “has a cause” is ambiguous, how can we know its origin? Here also the two basic criteria of discernment come into play: 1) we need to be able to describe well the experience we are going through—that is, analyze its intrinsic qualities—and 2) we need to be able to determine the precise direction in which it would carry us.

A consolation is discerned to be from the GS if *all of it*—beginning, middle, and end—carries us toward God and his Reign. In other words, if the consolation brings us closer to our “maxim.” In such a case there can be no doubt: we are experiencing signs that usually are from God and which carry us into his service.

The ES is able to take advantage of a consolation by manipulating psychological factors or by using the “remnants” of an earlier consolation. It is important to realize that the ES can only usurp consolations; it cannot produce them as such. Ignatius appears to be convinced that only the Spirit of Jesus and the Father can touch the heart and utter “groans” in the depths of our being (cf. Rom 8,26-27). Without our help, the ES can act only on the surface of our personality, by probing our imagination, feelings, fantasy, etc. Consolation is the sign and seal of God (cf. Cor 1,3-7), and the ES can do no more than usurp and falsify a consolation that has come from God, but it is always possible to expose the usurpation.

²² The Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner wrote brilliantly on this topic in his essay “The Dynamic Element of the Church,” which is included in the series *Quaestiones Disputatae*.

THE KEY TO DISCERNMENT IS A TWOFOLD PATH:

- * Review the consolation's complete trajectory: beginning, middle, and end (333)
- * Compare the final state in which we find ourselves with our prior state, even if we feel that everything is going "well." If there is any diminishment, however small, the trajectory is a least suspicious.

We should also pay attention to the "remnants" of the "consolation without cause." While we can have complete confidence in the consolations that come clearly from God, we cannot be so confident in what follows from them—even though everything seems to be going well! For that is where our own judgment can enter in or where the ES can take advantage of us. During this "second time," as Ignatius calls it, we must use not the rules for "consolation without cause" but those for ordinary consolation. This second time is ambiguous and requires discernment.

The life of Ignatius himself gives us an example of how this second time can be misread. During the experience at La Storta, when Ignatius felt that he was being "placed with the crucified Son," he concluded that immediate martyrdom was awaiting him in Rome. What he encountered instead was a troublesome period of constant misunderstanding, distrust, and persecution.

The meaning of consolation:

As we indicated at the beginning, consolation attains its greatest relevance in Ignatian spirituality at the moment of "confirmation." That is where its force and its meaning become most evident. What is confirmed may be a way of proceeding; it may be a path already begun; or it may be a choice of a way of life. The confirmation has to do with concrete Christian practice.

The deepest significance of consolation can be deduced from its role (as the most mature fruit) in each week of the Exercises. The "**Principle and Foundation**" (23), the basic overture of the Exercises, requests consolation as a sign from God in the form of "indifference," which gives the Spirit freedom to work in and through us. The most significant fruits of the "**first week**" are experienced as "forgiveness" and "mercy," which bring tears and internal contrition. The final goal of that consolation is the experience of being face to face with Christ crucified and asking: "*What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? Why am I going to do for Christ?*" (53).

All the consolations of the "**second week**" are framed within our request to "to be received under the standard of Christ" (147) in order to be a valiant follower of the "Eternal King" (91). The election process which takes place within the dynamic of the movement of spirits aims at helping a person to choose a state of life which allows the person to follow Jesus more closely and thus collaborate with the Reign of God.

Consolation in the "**third week**" allows us to identify with the suffering and distressed Jesus and to visualize the passion of Christ today in the world (193-203). But it is

perhaps the “**fourth week**” that helps us understand best the pragmatic aspect of consolation. The risen Jesus as “consoler” comes to confirm and strengthen his friends (227). He communicates to them the profound peace that nobody can take from them, and he sends them forth on the great Mission which is the fruit of that experience.

Stances to take with consolation:

When experiencing the gift of God that is consolation, we can assume various attitudes: acceptance or rejection, collaboration or apathy. Often we receive consolation as something “expected,” as was the case with Peter before the transfigured Jesus: “How good it is for us to be here!” However, consolation is more than that: it is the best time for requesting, desiring, and taking advantage of favorable strong breezes. We must make the best use possible of consolation; we must “pedal downhill.” Perhaps we have often failed to harvest the best fruit from consolation and so have fallen short of where the Lord would like to take us.

7. CONFIRMATION, THE REQUISITE SEAL OF DISCERNMENT

Discernment needs to be ratified. For Ignatius there is no discernment without confirmation in the sense of ratification. The process of discernment is valid only by virtue of the evangelical congruence of biography and history that it produces. Discernment cannot be just a sophisticated way of justifying our own veiled interests.

Confirmation puts us face to face with God’s action, which gives us consolation and fills us with interior peace. In the election of the Spiritual Exercises, the pros and cons of our decisions appear to be the key factors; they are what Ignatius calls either the “advantages and benefits” or the “disadvantages and dangers” of what is being decided (181). For Ignatius this deliberative process is aimed at leading us into a dynamic of consolations and spiritual movements which will provide confirmation about the matter to be decided. The most important part of the process is the confirmation. Also, the “manner” in which the confirmation has been given can, if interpreted well, reveal God’s “reasons” for choosing us for such a way or state of life.

Another essential component of the confirmation is coherence with the charism of church leadership. The basic reason for this is that we form the body of the Church, in which all things should work for the good of all the faithful. “Charisms” exist only for promoting the good of everyone and for building up of the kingdom of God.²³ All true discernment should be compared and contrasted with what the Spirit communicates to others, especially to the church community “that is hierarchical” (353). Since the ultimate aim of the charism of discernment is the good of the ecclesial body and the Kingdom of God, a particular discernment will not be complete until it is assayed by someone representing that body and the wider struggle for God’s Reign.

²³ It is not by accident that Karl Rahner’s chapter on “consolation without cause” was followed by his chapter exploring the theology of charisms (see the above mentioned work, “The Dynamic Element in the Church”).

Within this context, the confirmation of good discernment will be most certain when what is discerned advances God's Kingdom by placing us alongside the poor, where Jesus is still carrying his cross. The poor and our own personal poverty are the conditions for good discernment. The authenticating criterion for sound discernment is our own commitment, through being poor ourselves, to the struggle against all unjust, dehumanizing poverty. That is the place of verification.

This looks a lot like personal conversion. Puebla emphasized that a conversion is real only when it succeeds in changing the surrounding sociopolitical conditions (Puebla 1155).²⁴

This confirmation, which is so important for discernment, is experienced both interiorly and exteriorly. On the one hand, it is experienced in the internal realm of consolations and feelings of peace and strength, all of which are signs that we are on the right path. On the other, the confirmation is experienced also in the external, historical realm, where it takes the form of an ever greater commitment to the poor and their struggle. This does not mean that the process is something mechanical and immediate. Rather, in the long run our personal discernment should be part of a communal discernment which produces a social movement in solidarity with the poor. Since the historical verification of the validity of the discernment is to be found in the organization of the people who are fighting against the suppression of their rights, the confirmation will often involve being persecuted for the cause of Jesus.

Discerning means "letting ourselves be carried" by the movement of the Spirit who brings us closer to Jesus as he carries his cross ("Third Way of Being Humble"). It is likewise a process of drawing close to the poor and experiencing the "historical movement" which the poor themselves exert on our lives and our consciences. That historical movement is something almost tangible since it questions us, attracts us, and challenges us. The struggle of the poor—with Jesus in their midst—radicalizes our Christian identity; it moves us to embrace poverty and to take ever more risky stands for the cause of Jesus and the Kingdom.

Discerning means "letting ourselves be carried" by an interior movement of the Spirit (in an explicit moment of faith) that connects directly with the historical movement of Jesus in the people and challenges us to work for his cause (in an explicit moment of justice). In this way discernment is a dynamic that helps us to "understand that the service of faith and the promotion of justice are not juxtaposed, and much less opposed, but are the expression of a single movement of the Spirit" (GC33 1.42).

Discernment is therefore the grace that makes us witnesses to the faith that does justice, following not our own desires but the guidance of the Spirit.

Confirmation can have not only different forms of ratification but also diverse dimensions, depending on the type of discernment: personal, communal, or apostolic. The form of confirmation should be in accord with what is being discerned and should

²⁴ This was expressed also in 1981 by Pope John Paul II in *Laborem Exercens*, no. 8.

respect the limits of each discernment. Nevertheless, all confirmation should be in accord with what we have already explained about the meaning of Christian discernment.

Given this perspective, it is evident why discernment is always and everywhere an act of **daring**. In discerning, we throw ourselves into a process that strips us of our ego and allows us to assume, in our “flesh,” the destiny of Jesus himself, who fights and is killed in action for a Kingdom where the first citizens are the poor, the sickly, the afflicted, and the disabled. Still, we should remember that we are being introduced into a process where “all is grace.”²⁵ There is no place for willfulness or voluntarism but only for the creative passivity of being a follower of Jesus.

In the next part we will try to translate this experience and methodology into a form that can be learned well and put into practice. We will draw on our own personal experiences and on the experiences of good friends and companions that have been shared and recorded. They are “paths” that have been explored already and have borne fruit. I therefore present them simply and humbly.

SECOND PART: PEDAGOGY: THE DAILY EXAMEN

1. THE BURDEN AND THE HERITAGE OF OUR SPIRITUALITY

The importance Ignatius gave to the examination of conscience is well known. He considered it even more consequential than prayer. Prayer and the examen were the two spiritual instruments with which Ignatius equipped Jesuits to help them in their work, once the stages of formation and testing were past. I think there is plenty of evidence, however, that most of us Jesuits have been unsure about what exactly to do with the examen. Since its true purpose was not fully understood, there was a time when the examen was for all practical purposes poorly regarded and little valued. It was felt to be ineffective, but no theories were offered as to why; even worse, it was widely discredited and neglected.

In my view, the main reason for the lack of enthusiasm for the examen has been our rigid adherence to the dictates of number 43 of the Exercises. We have forgotten the Ignatius who gave us the “Two Standards,” the “Three Degrees of Humility,” and the rules for discernment. The daily examen would seem to belong to another world, but nothing could be more wrong. In his Autobiography Ignatius teaches Jesuits about the world of different “spirits,” explaining how they are to be judged and what criteria should come into play.²⁶ While doing his examen each day, Ignatius was constantly applying the norms that he would later formulate in the rules for discernment. Thus, the very life of Ignatius provides us with a model for the examen. That was where the examen

²⁵ A phrase used by Georges Bernanos in his work, *Diary of a Country Priest*.

²⁶ See the Nadal’s prologue to the Autobiography, in Iparraguirre, Ignacio, *Obras Completas de S. Ignacio de Loyola*, Madrid, BAC, 1963, 2nd ed. corrected and amended, pp. 84-85.

originated, and it was Ignatius's assiduous practice of it that evolved into his famous rules. The rules for discernment, then, are applicable not only to times of deliberation and election but also to ordinary daily life.

As described in number 43 of the Exercises, the examen can be used to analyze one's personal behavior. However, after months or years of noting the same faults in the same places with the same persons, the examen can become a tedious exercise, because what we are examining is our own behavior in a field where little can be done, where indeed the only alternatives are to "let ourselves be carried" by the Spirit of the Lord or to fall into the snares of the Evil One.

But in saying this we do not want to deny personal freedom. Far from it—nothing is more foreign to the thought of Ignatius and the Society. We simply want to put things in their proper place—which is most definitely the life of the Spirit, for as Jesus said: "Without me you can do nothing." We must put our liberty into practice and use it to the utmost, but the main thing in the end is "letting ourselves be carried." The cleverness consists in our wanting, *with total freedom*, "to be placed" with the Son, the Son who is carrying his cross in our own day.

It is this sphere, then, that we need to examine: it is *not our own actions but rather God's actions in each one of us; it is what happens in our personal lives; it is movements that can come from the GS or the ES*. This perspective is completely different from the ordinary practice. The examen is not about tabulating our own faults, which will always be with us. Rather, it is about sensing the direction in which the breeze of the Spirit is driving the sails of our heart and knowing how best to catch that breeze; it is becoming aware that the Spirit is propelling us "right now" and giving us the strength we need.

2. WHAT THE DAILY EXAMEN IS NOT

In a way we have already explained this. The examen is not a moral evaluation of our actions. It has something of that in it, but that is not the main purpose of it. We have already explained the reasons for this in the first part. Since the life of the spirit involves the "passive activity" of seeking to "let ourselves be carried," the aim of the examen is not to identify our errors or mistakes; it is rather to discover which way the wind is blowing, where our strength is coming from, and how we can join forces with that dynamic so as to give ourselves life and communicate life to others.

The examen is not a psychological evaluation either. We don't "examine" ourselves in order to discover our traumas, our wounds, our psychological reactions. Again, there may be something of that in the examen, but that is not its main thrust. The reasons are the same ones that we have already presented.

Also for the same reasons, the examen is not an additional moment of prayer at the end of the workday, a time when we recollect ourselves and spend time with the Lord. Doing

that is wonderful, but it is not the aim of the daily examen. There is a great deal of prayer in the examen, but the goal of the examen is not to pray.

3. WHAT THE DAILY EXAMEN OUGHT TO BE

In a word, the examen is the daily exercise of spiritual discernment. But what do we mean by that? What is the meaning of discernment?

To get a true understanding of discernment we need only to go the core meditations of the second week: the “Two Standards,” the “Three Classes of Persons,” and the “Three Ways of Being Humble.”

In the meditation on the “Two Standards,” discernment involves distinguishing clearly between the two opposed camps, the two principal poles of attraction. It means knowing them in depth. In the “Two Standards” we learn the *modus operandi* of the GS and that of the ES; we discover where their strongholds are (“Babylon” and “Jerusalem”); we become familiar with their tactics and their strategies. And above all, we come to understand our own reactions to those forces that are appealing to our freedom.

In the meditation on the “Three Classes of Persons,” discernment requires us to evaluate and judge the best possible way for us to be placed “under the standard of Christ.” No doubt, that is simply letting ourselves be carried to where he is already moving us. Thus the whole examen is an act of faith—the attitude of the “Third Class of Person”—faith that the key thing in the spiritual life is “letting ourselves be carried” and asking “to be placed.” The “maxim” is *the* means for getting ourselves placed under the standard of Christ. During discernment, it is the maxim that ponders and evaluates the movements (of the GS) and the ploys (of the ES). Whatever draws us closer to the maxim is a sign of the “good angel,” according to Ignatius, and what distances us from the maxim is the opposite.

According to the perspective of the meditation on the “Third Way of Being Humble,” the discernment of the examen is not so much choosing between good and evil—that happens in meditation on the “Two Standards.” Rather, it means opening ourselves to being ever more radicalized by the Lord; it is the ultimate deepening of the “maxim.” In this sense, the “Third Way of Being Humble” goes beyond the “Two Standards,” for it is no longer just a question of choosing between the standard of Jesus and the standard of the Evil One. The aim now is keep advancing from what is good to what is better. The “Third Way” helps us to grasp the full meaning of the supreme surrender in its ultimate dimensions. It demands, as a prerequisite and verification of discernment, a concrete connection with real poverty and with Jesus’ destiny of being persecuted, of being “scandal and folly for the world.”

Discerning, then, means knowing how to reconnoiter the fields in which the Lord and the Evil One are acting. It means positioning ourselves purposefully with respect to them, knowing their methods, their objectives, and their strategies (“Two Standards”).

Most of all, discerning means desiring “to be carried” (“Three Classes of Persons”) to where we are already being led.

Discernment is an unending process of radicalization in the Lord. It is choosing, yes, but not choosing between good and bad; it means opting for what the Lord always asks of us and responding to it wholeheartedly (“Third Way of Being Humble”). Discernment means being docile to the movement of the Spirit that joins us with the poor and their struggle. This is a movement that is both personal and social. Being personally poor and working to eradicate all dehumanizing poverty is a condition and criterion for verifying discernment.

The daily examen is the ongoing exercise of this process of discernment, enabling us day by day to embrace God’s work in us and to open ourselves more and more to his gentle intimations. *The examen is not so much to see if we have done good or done evil. That will need to be done, but the examen is mainly concerned with the reasons why we have ended up doing evil. It asks why we let ourselves be seduced and overcome by an insidious ploy.* The examen will also ask why we closed ourselves off to an impulse from the Lord, which we definitely felt but decided to ignore. That is what the examen is about.

The examen is the moment for us to bear witness to the workings of the Father in us, thanks to the action of the Spirit who conforms us with the Son. The examen takes account of how the Divine Persons are fashioning us into companions of Jesus and how that path of companionship requires that we practice the justice that is demanded by faith, even if it costs us our lives.

4. DISCOVERING THE “MAXIM”: THE BASIC REQUIREMENT

In explaining how to discern, we have proposed as a model the daily examen. Of course, this daily exercise of discernment presupposes that a person has achieved an experience of God and has felt the action of the “spirits” during the 30 days of exercises or a retreat of 8 to 10 days. Besides this experience needed for discernment, a person needs also to be earnestly dedicated to prayer and the daily examen. Without placing oneself daily before God in prayer and examen, it is difficult to speak about doing discernment.

We should also recall something we have pointed out from the start: the basic requirement for being able to discern as Christians, following the model proposed by Ignatius, is our bond with the poor and our embrace of actual poverty. This is the condition of possibility and also the criterion of verification for all true discernment.

But even so, something else is needed to help this general process and in its daily practice (in the examen): it is discovering what we have been calling the “maxim.” *This “discovering” generally takes place during the month of exercises, right after the election, but the discovery may also happen later, as we look back on the way God has led our lives.*

Once the election is confirmed, it is time for the formulation of a “life project.” Sadly, these life projects, like all human ambitions, are often short-lived and have little effect on our spiritual life. At best they are programs that we try to carry out by ourselves, most often involving pseudo-commitments that are simply impossible to keep. We forget that in the spiritual life “we can do nothing” without the Lord (John 15,5).

Ultimately, all basic reform of life depends solely on the Lord’s work within us, and that work is related to the manner in which he leads us. The month-long exercises are an apprenticeship in “letting ourselves be led.” The exercises—thanks to careful discernment—allow us to perceive where God is “already” moving us and where, so to speak, he promises to help us in the future.

We call “maxim” the experience by which we are able to “formulate” or give a name to the principal movement by which the Lord has already been impelling us and continues to carry us. This experience is usually revealed to us in a clear and indisputable manner. We sense that it comes from God because its characteristics evoke the Kingdom—Matt 25,31ff; Luke 6,36; Luke 9,23—without discounting the person who is being thus moved (Matt 19,19).

In this sense we introduce an innovation into Ignatian terminology, but we do so believing that it is the correct interpretation of what Ignatius might call “secondary elections.” Drawing on the richness involved in the term “maxim,” taken from the realm of politics, we point out the parallelism between the experience of adopting a political maxim as a party militant and the experience of receiving from God a watchword that impels us to reorganize the whole of our lives. The characteristics of a political maxim—which is what inspired our use of the term—are the following:

- + A political maxim is given: it is an order indicating direction.
- + It responds to the interests, the needs, and the possibilities of a group of people.
- + A maxim is pragmatic: it is completely oriented to the praxis it expresses.
- + It is also programmatic; that is, it can give rise to a series of projects that respond to the people’s needs.
- + A maxim generates identity; it is repeatedly voiced; it is therefore short.
- + The purpose of a maxim is to be effective, to bring about all that it evokes. This does not always happen.

The maxim of the Spirit is quite similar to political maxims, but it has a series of unique elements that we should clarify.

Our maxim, given to us by God, reveals the “manner” in which God wants us to lead our lives. It is what assimilates each one of us to the following of Jesus. It is what keeps a state of life, a structure, or a personal election from being satanized. It prevents us from becoming bourgeois or routinized—or “lukewarm,” in the traditional language. The maxim on its own generates movement, but it is not a movement that we produce. We only react to the movement, either well or poorly, by allying with it or rejecting it, with trust or distrust. If we let ourselves be led by the maxim, the Lord will work marvels in us, but these are granted to aid our labors for God’s reign, not to enrich us personally.

The exercitant is invited to ask for the maxim while in the “first time,” that is, when it imposes itself definitively, beyond all doubt (175). The Lord does not have to be begged: he readily places his name and his seal on the movement that he has already ignited within us for the purpose of engaging us in his action of resurrecting the world. There is need for caution, all the same: observing rule 8 of the “second epoch” (336), we should know how to separate “our own discourse” from what is given by the Lord—beyond all doubt or possibility of doubt. Otherwise we may falsely assume that the Lord will give us strength and that we—for whatever reasons—will do “our part.” We should remember the example of Ignatius himself and how he mistakenly interpreted the vision of La Storta to mean that he was to be martyred in Rome.

Once God has enunciated for us our maxim, it is a highly rewarding and revealing experience to review earlier movements and view them in the light the maxim. Such an exercise may serve as corroboration. Everything takes on a new brilliance and meaning as the movements which before seemed disconnected begin to converge and resonate with the maxim.

It is also important to study how we react to those movements as they converge in the maxim. We should notice that we have made true progress only to the extent that we have let ourselves be carried; when we have closed ourselves off and refused to collaborate, we have retreated in the following of Jesus.

The maxim has various characteristics, the most important one of which, as we’ve already said, is that it comes directly from God. In this sense, it has a certain immutable character. *It can be changed, in principle, only through another experience of the same high caliber—in duration, in quality, or in intensity.* It is possible to modify the life projects that flow from the maxim, but not their originating inspiration.

The maxim leads us unquestionably to the things of God and his Kingdom: seeing Christ in the needy (Matt 25,31ff.), having a merciful heart (Luke 6,36), and being ready to give even our lives for the cause (Luke 9,23). Nor should our own person be excluded from being the object of such a movement (Matt 19,19).

The maxim also becomes our “petition” and our basic form of prayer. The maxim is not an order from God but rather a “decisive intimation” that God offers us. We can transform that intimation into a basic petition, and once it is made a petition, we can send endless requests asking for more grace and more help from God. It is a type of *ejaculatory strategy*. The maxim always comes with a mental representation, an image that is given to us along with the maxim itself. By evoking that associated image, we can establish an appropriately personal “composition of place.”

The maxim also affects the body and indicates the best posture for prayer. It is important to pay close attention in this regard, for it is the only real contribution we can make. Our posture contributes to making the movement—the maxim—happen. For that reason we should practice the famous “additions” of the Exercises (73-90), which describe the small ways in which we can improve our personal disposition for prayer.

We have said that the maxim is an intimation, not an order. It is usually formulated as an imperative, but it completely respects a person's free will. It does not impose itself. For that precise reason we can let it pass us by; we can ignore it or directly contradict its suggestive urging. We insist that the maxim is a "movement." It is not something that we can produce ourselves. A person can observe the "additions" but can do nothing more than that. At the same time, the maxim is not a rallying cry that incites pig-headedness or indiscrete fervor.

A most important characteristic of the maxim is that it becomes *the essential criterion of my discernment*. Once we have a maxim, we can contrast our interior movements, not with an abstract idea of "where they are carrying us," but with the maxim itself. If a movement resonates with the maxim, we can assume that it is coming from God; if a movement clashes with the maxim or distracts us from it, that movement should rouse our suspicions.

The maxim defines our role under the standard of Christ. It helps us to recognize the ploys of the ES and do away with our "Babylons." It prevents us from taking "halfway measures" in the following of Jesus. Remaining true to the maxim, we hope never to hear the Lord saying to us: "Because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth" (Rev 3,16). The maxim is the most effective "means" for placing ourselves with the Son on the cross; it allows the historical flesh of Jesus to be born again in our own lives. It is able to work so effectively because it embodies the force of God which is already pushing us forward.

By drawing out all the consequences, both in time and in commitment, that flow from the maxim, we are able to design our own "Third Way of Being Humble," our personal utopia, the goal to which the Lord would have us aspire. *The "Third Way of Being Humble" is the maxim seen from its goal, that is, from its ultimate consequences.* We might imagine the maxim as the compass needle that shows us where we are now and where we are headed. Even more than a compass needle, the maxim is like a guided missile, which pursues its course and propels itself while following precise coordinates.

As the overarching spiritual movement, the maxim binds us together with the Jesus who is impoverished and humiliated in history. That same movement connects us also with another force, one that can almost touch us physically: the challenge presented to us by the poor who want to be free. When that happens, a "historical movement" begins to establish itself in our lives, a movement that truly configures us to the suffering Jesus who is continually persecuted and despoiled and yet always seeking resurrection. No longer will it be only the desires placed in our hearts by God that keep us following the path of Jesus. Those challenges and our small attempts to respond to them will keep driving us forward, ever closer to the "Third Way of Being Humble." That is the movement we call "historical." It is a movement that will take various forms, according to the personal history of each one of us.

If we compare that maxim of the Spirit with the maxims found in politics, we can find parallels that are suggestive:

- + Our maxim is given by to us God. It is simply the formulation in words of what God has already done in us. There is absolutely no way in which we can attribute it to our own doing.
- + The maxim comes to me *ad hoc*; that is, it is for me as a particular person. A maxim is understood only by the person to whom it is given. The maxim takes account of our weaknesses and our sins, as well as our virtues and gifts. It encompasses the whole of our being, and everything converges on it.
- + The maxim is also pragmatic because it orients us toward practice, and our practice leads us perforce to the “Third Way of Being Humble,” which in turn gives expression to the “historical movement.”
- + The maxim is also programmatic since it enables us to initiate projects which can adapt themselves to different circumstances.
- + The maxim gives us identity and unifies us; it is the petition we utter deep within ourselves.
- + Most importantly—and here it differs most sharply from a political maxim—our maxim is supremely “efficacious.” It is like the Word of the Lord which does not return to him empty (Isa 55,11). It will always bear fruit if we but yield to its sway.

The maxim of the Spirit should never be silenced, not even within the movement of history. Least of all there! The historical task is always subject to the ploys of “Babylon”: self-centeredness, extreme pride, emotional rigidity. Progress in the following of Jesus comes about only in the dialectic between the movement of the Spirit and the movement of history. In this way we gradually achieve a personal synthesis between faith and justice.

Since we have already explained the underlying rationale of the examen, we want to propose now a concrete way of doing the daily examen. This suggestion should not be taken as something rigidly structured; rather, it is a basic method that becomes simpler to use the more skilled one becomes in practicing it. It is a structure that invites us to discover our own path by emphasizing certain key points,

5. METHODOLOGY OF THE DAILY EXAMEN

a. We place ourselves in the presence of the Lord, asking him for the grace and the light to know better the work that he wants to realize through us. We ask him to lend us his eyes so that we can see deeply into ourselves, with honesty and tenderness. Being in the presence of God, we adapt our bodies to harmonize with the theme of the maxim so as to favor the impulse.

b. We review the of the day.

- + The aim here is not first of all to detect our bad deeds, but rather to detect the presence of the ES and the GS.
- + We record the sensations or thoughts in simple juxtaposition.
- + We take note of them at the moment of the examen.

- c. What is the prevailing mood or disposition of the day?
 + Can it be defined as consolation (C), desolation (D), or tranquil time (TT)?
- d. We choose one particular sensation or thought of the day....
 + because either it evokes the maxim, the dominant movement by which we are carried, or it does the very opposite. The maxim is the great detector.²⁷
- e. We analyze the experience as follows:
 + We describe it in all its depth and breadth.
 — We take note of whether we are dealing with a sensation or a discourse. The difference is helpful for discerning the spirit.
 — We specify the “occasion” in which the movement or the ploy took place. We refer to the “Babylons” or the “Jerusalems” (cf. note 10).
 + We establish the psychological connection for understanding the origin of the sensation (in the case of a ploy).
 — We see what wound is being reopened or what instinct is being exacerbated (first epoch).²⁸
 — We see what indiscreet fervors or exaggerated ideals are being provoked (second epoch).
 + We detect the direction of the sensation: *where it is carrying us*. We determine the direction of this movement in its first and its final impulse.
 — If we already have our maxim, we judge whether the movement brings us closer to it or distances us from it. *That* is the criterion.
 — If we do not have our maxim, we judge whether the movement carries us toward generosity and mercy. These signs of God are the works of the Spirit in general, and vice versa.
 — We do well to remember the scheme of the “Two Standards.”
 + Our reaction
 + It is important to be able to tell the difference between the first reaction and the second reaction, for it is this second reaction which has actually entered into our biography and into history. It is not unusual for there to be a difference between the first reaction and the second reaction, the one that has truly left its mark on space and time.
 — The reactions may take various forms, such as alliance/rejection, activity/passivity, vehemence/moderation, etc.
 — It is important to observe the reaction not only in the first moment but also in the “second” moment, which is the one that is truly decisive (cf. Matt 21,28-32).
 — We should judge the goodness or badness of our actual behavior only within this more fundamental context of reactions.
 — Appropriate action against the ES should correspond to the character of each spiritual epoch. We should therefore remember that the treatment

²⁷ It can at times be important to choose an experience that is contrary to what we are experiencing at the moment of making the examen. The reason for this is that discernment becomes clearer when there is contrast, which makes things stand out better.

²⁸ The movements of the GS can also attach themselves to wounds, but always for the purpose of healing them. The action of God works outside the usual parameters.

of a first-epoch ploy is very different from that of a second-epoch ploy. The correct reaction to each of them should be as we indicated previously.

f. We reconsider the feelings we experienced at the precise moment of the examen. We analyze that experience using the same four criteria previously mentioned: description, origin, direction, reaction (both first and second).

- + This moment is very important because at this point we may become aware that we did not react well to the experience we underwent. If it was a movement, we may not have responded to it with sufficient enthusiasm or energy; we did not seek to make alliances with it. And if it was a ploy, then the opposite.
- + What is most important about this moment, at any rate, is that it provides us an opportunity to reconnect with the maxim in case there has been some lessening of fervor in the spiritual life. The ploys of the first epoch are easy to identify, but those of the second epoch are basically *covert*. The only sign of their presence is a certain attenuation of fervor, of dedication, or of interest. That is what should ring our alarm bells. If the matter is not clarified immediately, then we should subject it to future observation.

g. Colloquy of alliance with the Lord.

The examen ends with a prayer of petition in which we ask for a rekindling of the desires which formerly accompanied the maxim, which is the Lord's promise of aid and support.

- + We again become fully conscious that we can do all things in him who strengthens us and that without him we can do nothing. It is not a question of elaborating proposals but of extending our sails ever further so that, swollen with the winds of the Spirit, they will carry us forward on the sea of life.
- + The background of this examen is the "Third Way of Being Humble." It is toward that goal that we must advance, always driven on by the power of the Spirit.

THE EXAMEN AND THE INTERIOR MOVEMENTS

PSYCHOLOGIC LEVEL	SPIRITUAL LEVEL	MORAL LEVEL
What is it working on? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wounds • Exaggerated ideals 	Where is it taking me? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The direction • The maxim 	How did I react? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First moment and second • The historical impact.

Assessment of the examen

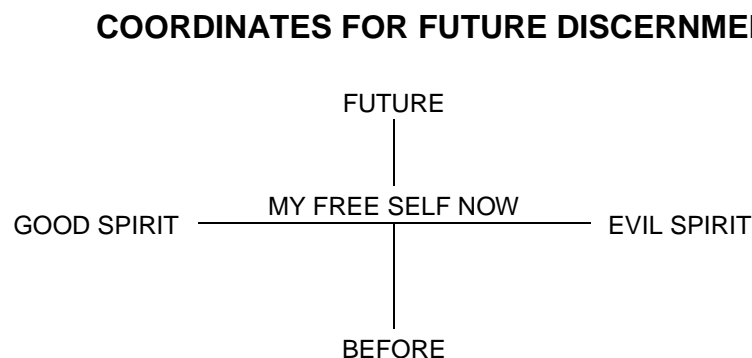
Like all discernment, the examen needs to be assessed, shared, and checked by a constituted authority. The experiences of Saint Ignatius give us abundant examples of this practice, which is necessary for the validation of personal discernment. What Ignatius experienced in his own life he set down in his rules. The Exercises he proposes require that the exercitants be accompanied by someone who can counsel them. At the end of the *fourth week* there is an explanation of the “rules for thinking, judging, and feeling with the Church” (352). Ignatius makes it clear that the whole process of discernment has an ecclesial character and that discernment is confirmed only when it is ratified by someone who authoritatively *accompanies* the exercitant.

In everyday life an appropriate guide for someone following this procedure would be a spiritual director or some other authorized companion.

In religious life the *natural* companion is the superior. The more a discernment process is involved with making decisions (deliberations), the more consultation there should be with the superior. Of course, when a mission has already been given, there is no room for discernment as such, unless it is for the purpose of judging the appropriateness of “representation,” that is, of presenting to the superior the honest objections one has about the mission that has been given. Even when one’s personal objections appear to have the seal of God’s Spirit, they should in the end be submitted to the superior’s decision—unless, of course, there is a true objection of conscience, which will be infrequent.

6. WHAT THE EXAMEN REVEALS TO US ABOUT DISCERNMENT

As we have presented it, the examen reflects two constitutive aspects of discernment, which we might call the horizontal and vertical aspects. The horizontal aspect describes for us the movements of the GS and the ploys of the ES, and also how our freedom responds to them. The vertical aspect reveals to us a somewhat forgotten element: the reality of the “different times” in the whole discernment process.



The horizontal axis represents the field of action of the GS and the ES, both of which try to attract our freedom. This axis has already been explained adequately here and in

other places. We want to move on now to explain the meaning of the vertical axis, which has to do with the spiritual times.

The vertical axis starts off from below and moves upward. It has a root, so to speak. At the root we locate what we might call the spiritual *before*, and of course the *before* par excellence is the maxim.

Not only does discernment consider the movements and the ploys, but it compares the present situation with what was relevant “before” for the subject discerning. Let us explain this further.

The different modalities of time in the spirit:

- + the diverse times in my reaction: the first, and the one that truly stamps the action
- + the past experience or movement or day that is analyzed, and the experience of the examen itself
- + the moment of future desolation and consolation, and vice versa (321, 323, 324)
- + the *second time* (336) after a consolation without previous cause
- + the *before* to which Ignatius alludes: the good proposals made during times of consolation
- + and for us most importantly, the *before* that refers us to the maxim, for that is where God has revealed himself to us most concretely. It is through the maxim that God has promised us grace in a way that is already becoming reality. At times the maxim may become obscured: that is the work of the ES, which tries to make us lose hope in it. That is why it is important to return (at least) to that desire to desire that we experienced earlier, when we felt the full force of the maxim.

All that constitutes the root of the vertical axis of discernment.

This axis has a center, which is the *now*, that precise moment of our lives when we are making the examen. That is the only moment that is properly “ours.” It is where we can recover any fruit that was lost; it is where we can react positively to the movements of the Spirit; it is where we can forcefully reject the ploys of the Evil One.

It is very important that we experience this *now* in an atmosphere of prayer because the way we behave in prayer is the way we can behave in active life. This inverts any inertia that may have set in; it proclaims the possibility of our being fully children of the Father!

The top of the vertical axis is the *future*, which remains open. It is the *after*, the projection of what we are experiencing *now*. It will be the fruit of letting ourselves be carried by the force of the Lord—the maxim. But it always starts out from the present.

7. DISCERNMENT AND THE SPIRITUAL TIMES

Our previous exposition has shown the importance of the diverse times as a criterion of discernment. We have stressed that examining these different times can help us to recognize better the will of God.

- a. There is the time that highlights the things that are immutable, the things that are signs of God *in whom there can be no change* (Const. 116). As Saint Ignatius says: *God our Lord has the quality of being immutable, while our enemy is mutable and variable*. One criterion, therefore, is that anything that promotes either brusque changes or frequent changes in different directions is a sign of the evil spirit. Sometimes almost any objection or difficulty can make us question our vocation, the priesthood, etc. We should remember that God chooses for the long term, unless he demonstrates otherwise and does so with a force as strong as the one that moved us before. God is faithful.
- b. An unmistakable sign of God is the continuity of his movements in carrying us toward the good. That is why Ignatius wants us to consider whether the beginning, middle, and end of a movement are all good, because when they are, that is a sign of God. We can discern properly, therefore, only when we compare the different moments, the diverse spiritual times (cf. 323, 334, 336). What is perhaps most important in all this is our realization that any deterioration in the life of the Spirit should be taken with the utmost seriousness. Any weakening of our first desires, of our *first love* (Rev 2,4), should be viewed with alarm since it reveals the presence of the enemy, who is already effectively discharging his venom in homeopathic potions.
- c. When we examine and compare different spiritual times (*before, now*) with their respective movements and ploys, much light get thrown on our behavior, especially our reactions. Perhaps we are making more pacts with the ploys than alliances with the movements...
- d. We emphasize the *now*, because the only time we have in our hands is the present, and thanks to the examen the present becomes for us a richer time for exercising our responsibility. It is the time when we can evoke our maxim, drawing forth from it all its fruit and feeling its force in us once again. If for whatever reason the maxim becomes obscured, we can desire to have again those former holy desires. We open ourselves once more to that movement which has already propelled us forward over time, so that it continues to drive us on today and in the future.
- e. We are opened to the future, a future that will always involve the *Third Way of Being Humble*. Our future cannot be separated from that ideal, which must always be a magnet for us. The future is the space in which we have asked *to be placed with the Son* who is carrying his cross.²⁹

²⁹ In this work we have countless times repeated the phrase *be placed*, often followed by phrases such as *under the standard of Christ, with the Son, with the Father, with the Son on the Cross*, etc. This language also appears in the Spiritual Exercises in other equivalent forms: *to be received*, for example (147), or to

We must not forget the summary statement we made at the beginning of this chapter: discernment impels us toward *letting ourselves be carried*—great audacity!—by an overriding spiritual movement (= explicit moment of faith) toward the concretization of faith in the struggle of the poor, where Jesus is to be found (= explicit moment of justice).

All that happens on a field of combat between the Spirit of God and that other spirit which is embodied in the social structures of the world. This combat will require us to pay the tribute that is inevitably exacted by the struggle for justice in an unjust world. Learning to discern means learning to accept being despised and rejected by the spirit of this world. In the end, though, this is a battle from which we can emerge victorious. The twists and turns of the Spirit will prepare us to understand the vagaries of history.

The future of Christianity depends necessarily on God's reign. The future of discernment, therefore, is the future of the Kingdom. "Only when we come to live out our consecration to the Kingdom in a communion that is for the poor, with the poor, and against all forms of human poverty, material and spiritual, only then will the poor see that the gates of the Kingdom are open to them" (GC 32, 48).

THIRD PART: POSTSCRIPT

CONSOLATION FOR OUR FAILINGS

This chapter could have ended on the previous page, but we have one concern still: this essay may lead some to believe that life in the Spirit is only for people who are very well prepared, a select few. Quite the contrary! Since the Gospel is truly understood only by the simple of heart and the dispossessed, then this manner of keeping faith with God and his People assumes no special wisdom, nor does it require any worldly power or status. *God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God* (1 Cor 1.26-29).

There may appear to be something contradictory in the bold tone of this work's title: *Daring to Let Ourselves Be Carried*. But that contradiction is precisely the key to understanding discernment. Certainly, discernment is daring, but what counts is the active passivity, the free and generous response to the gratuity of God's gift. And when we talk about *passivity*, there is indeed an abundance of it.

desire "what God our Lord will move one's will to choose" (155). Ultimately such phrases derive from various narratives (e.g., from the Autobiography, no. 96; from Jerome Nadal, from Diego Laínez) in which some of the first companions of the new Society of Jesus recounted the vision Ignatius had at the shrine of the Virgin of La Storta as he was arriving in Rome in 1538. The experience left him completely convinced that *God the Father was placing him with Christ, his Son* (Autobiography, no 96).

For us to set off on the way of the Spirit when we are so irredeemable, so sinful and wounded, so feeble and yet so cunning—that is the height of daring! Daring does not require us to be brash or impetuous; it simply requires us to accept being called to be and to do what we could never be and do on our own. It is the height of daring suddenly to find ourselves doing works of mercy and acting in the manner of Jesus—“despite” all our weaknesses and sins. That is real boldness! Daring demands that we pay no mind to the “despite” of our failings but that we go further still, declaring with total conviction that it is precisely because of our sins and our weaknesses that the Lord has had mercy on us and is delighted to have us as his companions in serving the wretched of the earth. This is pure Gospel language (cf. Mark 2,17 and Luke 15,7).

Daring means not feeling the dizziness induced by our many failings and casual cruelties. Daring means abstaining from judging moral qualities and attitudes. All that will be added on later. Daring means not being concerned about the boat we are in, whether it is large, strong, sturdily built, comfortable, and well-caulked. What we have to contribute on our part is that it not take on water... The rest doesn't count. The important thing is to reach the port. That is daring! The spiritual life is like traveling on a sailing vessel: the only thing that matters is catching the wind and letting ourselves be carried toward our destiny. We should strive to prescind from the balance sheet of qualifiers and be attentive only to the direction of the wind. We need to be skilled in setting the sails so as to catch the full force of the wind. We should therefore rejoice when we see the sails swell mightily and the boat moves forward. That is the daring of letting ourselves be carried!

It is also the daring of entering into the life of the Spirit and desiring to be witnesses of the great works of Jesus, even when our own lives seem unvirtuous and show few signs of the action of Jesus. Perhaps it is better if we don't have the strengths—the virtues—of the Lord. In the spiritual life, contrary to the philosophical saying, one *does* give what one does not have. Only by communicating what we lack—great paradox!—can we come to possess it, thanks to *what we receive back* from those on whom we have bestowed the Lord's strength. This is incomprehensible by human logic, but it is corroborated by our experience. Often, for example, when we are in deep desolation, we are amazed at our ability to communicate peace and tranquility to those who are distressed. It is precisely in the transmission of this vital energy (which we did not really possess) that we come to find peace and tranquility ourselves, reflected back to us from those whom we have helped. At that moment we receive consolation, and that is often how the Lord makes known to us his abiding presence. Being ready for all this requires great daring.

It is not our intention in this epilogue to summarize and synthesize all that we have proposed in this essay. What we wanted to say is already said. The job now is move forward. This is the time when we must undo the moorings and set sail. We should not fear to put out to sea. We need to distinguish clearly between letting ourselves be tossed by the waves and letting ourselves be carried by the favorable winds. Now is the time to hoist up our anchors and to set forth, in the words of Machado, *with minimal luggage and as naked as the sons of the sea*.

If these pages have helped to inspire readers to deepen their perspectives and broaden their horizons as they journey through life, then we have done our task well. What we have tried to express here is not just some “knowledge” but a lived experience.

Let us hope that what was said of Ignatius may one day be said of us: that we follow the Spirit without rushing ahead, that we let ourselves be gently led to a place we know not, and that we travel along the road with the wise ignorance of those whose hearts are set simply on Christ.