

DECISION MAKING

Based on the Approach of St Ignatius of Loyola

It is assumed that:

- ◆ This is a choice between two or more good things
- ◆ There is probably an option that is more who you are (before God)
- ◆ This decision takes place within a believing community, rather than just what feels good to me – there are some Christian norms e.g. Scripture and the tradition of the Church

Other Presuppositions in Christian decision making:

- ◆ I already have a conscious relationship with God – in some way
- ◆ God wants what is best for me, what delights and fulfils – the Glory of God is the human person fully alive
- ◆ God wants me to live in love and for me to know I am loved
- ◆ God leaves me free (true lover)

God's love is not conditional on my response or right decision

Discerned decisions are about what God wants me to desire, they do not predict the future, there are no guarantees of success!

Another basic assumption – all human beings are deep down happiest when they live a life of love – loving God, self, others. 'It is in giving that we receive'. Selfishness, though a temptation for all, does not bring joy.

- ◆ Balance / Freedom – aim for this (it is not possible to achieve complete balance!)
- ◆ Being willing to do whatever is the will of God – law, what is most human.
- ◆ Being willing to sacrifice my superficial preferences, likes and dislikes to what is at the deepest level 'right for me' – my deepest desire – this may even be uncomfortable but I know it is right for me.
- ◆ I aim to use all my gifts in a way that will give greatest service to God.

Three ways in which I might come to a clear decision:

1. Blinding Flash

Everything becomes so clear that there is no longer any doubt in my mind; what I should do is obvious to me.

2. Following my deepest desires: Discernment of Spirits

Being aware of my own deep desires and feelings I come to realise that a particular course of action brings me peace as I think and pray about it over time. Before I come to such a place of peace, there are often swings of consolation and desolation. Over time these feelings / moods are weighed, discerned and reflected upon.

3. Working things out

When I cannot sift my deeper desires, or seem to have no particularly strong feelings one way or the other, it is useful to try to think clearly through all the issues around the decision. This will often also stir up my feelings.

I consider the pros and cons of all the options open to me and I try to see which would bring the greater good, which of the reasons for or against each course of action are important to me. I then see if the thought of following this action brings me peace and consolation.

Also at this time it is useful to engage your imagination and see if that helps to stir your desires.

- ♦ I imagine I decide X ... how does that feel ... and then imagine Y ...?
- ♦ I imagine a point in the future, how would I feel then if I do X or Y?
- ♦ I imagine a friend has the same decision to make ... what would I say?
- ♦ I imagine myself talking to God – what might he say to me? How does that feel?

Does one course of action bring a greater sense of peace and consolation?

Confirmation

Once you think a decision has been made you are still in the process of discernment, in this case waiting for some sort of confirmation.

- ♦ As I sit with this decision does it feel right? If so, can I say why?
- ♦ Does the sense of peace and gentle lightness persist?
- ♦ Does this decision seem to best fit 'who I am' before God?

(NB It may well not be possible to answer these questions, you are just left with a sense of '... mmm I'm pretty sure this is right.' Always a good idea at this point to give thanks for that.)

Relief that a decision has been made is NOT confirmation in itself, be careful.

With any decision between two good things, it is often difficult to let go of one option, even when the other becomes the obvious thing to do. It is common to have some sense of loss, even though the discernment basically brings peace.

For some people making a decision is always difficult, and many (perhaps most people) never arrive at absolute certainty. In the end we have to recognise that we do the best we can with the situation in which we find ourselves. We trust that the God who loves us unconditionally and draws us to himself will remain with us, helping us, whether we get it wholly 'right' or not. Fear of getting it wrong is one of the biggest obstacles to good discernment and decision making.



The Annunciation. (R-60037-CW)

Four elements to keep in mind (at all points in the process)

Faith

- ◆ Images of God and Jesus – how is God regarding you?
- ◆ Your sense of how God acts in the world. The following are a few misleading images:
 - Everything is predestined.
 - God is interested but not actively involved.
 - God is waiting impatiently for my decision.
 - God has the script but I cannot see it.
- ◆ A more helpful image:
 - God is lovingly leading me, in the decision with me, helping me even if I don't see it.
- ◆ Style of prayer, previous experience of discernment of spirits. Use of noticing and reflecting, rather than grabbing the first thought or text.
- ◆ Place of tradition and the Church if you are part of a community.

Facts

- ◆ Realistic approach to your own gifts and skills.
- ◆ Time spent gathering and considering different options.
- ◆ Different personalities: some people will want to limit possibilities too soon, others will keep opening up new possibilities, new lines of enquiry.
- ◆ Is there a time limit to this decision? Beware of desire for haste when it's not necessary.
- ◆ Openness to all the options.

Freedom

- ◆ You will never be totally free, but you can at least have the desire for freedom and 'indifference' and ask for the grace you need to move towards it in trust.
- ◆ You are aiming to be at balance, content with whatever the outcome because you know God, and that is more important than this particular decision.
- ◆ What is getting in the way? Others, self, lack of trust, lack of options, unrealistic desires ...
- ◆ Are you free enough, and happy to take a risk on God?
- ◆ Self-knowledge / maturity.

Fear

- ◆ Almost always plays some part in decision making.
 - 'What if I get it wrong? Will God be angry/distant/impatient/punitive?'
- ◆ It can be very subtle. E.g. concern for others that becomes paralysing for oneself.
- ◆ There will rarely be 100% confidence in a decision, a risk will need to be taken if you are to follow the promptings of the Spirit – who does not confirm by post! This is why trust and freedom are so necessary. In the end the actual decision should be secondary to you as you stand before God, it is the relationship with God, whatever the circumstances, which will give peace and hope.

See: www.jesuit.org.uk/discernment

Exercise: Remembering a Past Decision

Take some time to become still, maybe using a breathing exercise or mantra.

Offer your time and memory to God, asking that God will prompt your heart and mind so that you can recall his presence in your life.

Bring to mind a decision you made in the past, one that took some time, or was complicated. You might want to write down your thoughts and feelings as you consider some of the following ideas.

Recall the details as far as you are able – times, places, people involved, facts of the situation, influences on you at the time.

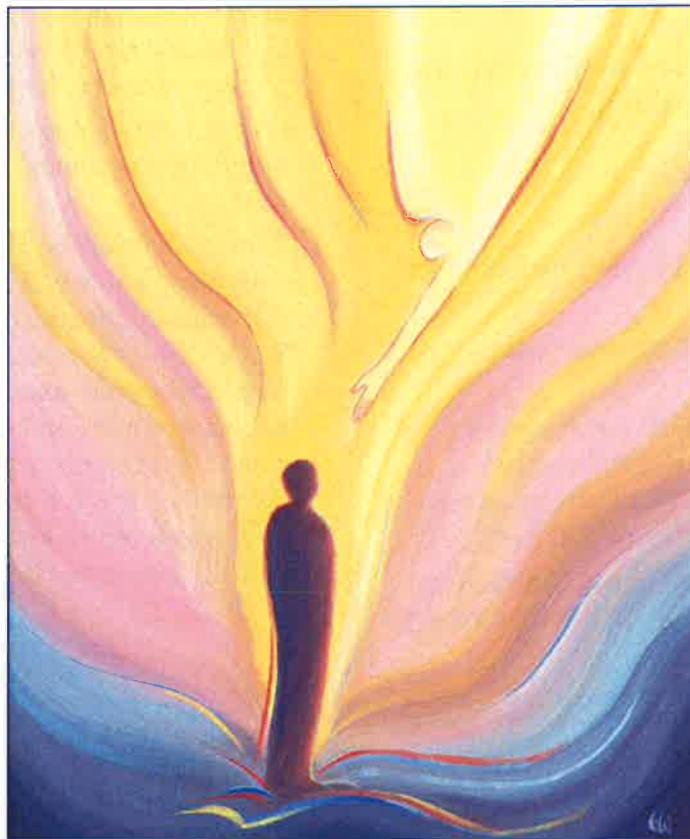
Did you find yourself praying at the time?
If so, in what way?

What helped you in the process – people, ideas, God, other factors ...?
What got in the way – people, fears, complications ...?

As you look back, do you have a sense of how God was present to you, or how you imagined God with you ... supporting, distant, quiet, not relevant, impatient, guiding ...?

Take a few minutes to talk to God about the situation ...

After remembering this time, what does it tell you about yourself and how you make decisions?
What might it tell you about the graces you can pray for when making decisions?
Does the experience tell you anything about how God draws you in? If so, how?



The Holy Spirit is like fire from Heaven, bringing us His love, purity, wisdom and power. (T-01941-01-V2)

Visit the Spirituality website: pathwaystogod.org

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