



DAY 31 : Conference

Rules for Making an Election

As we've been making our way through the different exercises—meditations and contemplations—we've been receiving different lights, different motions of the different spirits, and various fruits (indeed, as was said at the beginning, each meditation or contemplation should have some concrete fruit I can take away from it, something that I have been given). These are all good things, but we can't leave them just at that: we need to take what we've been given and incorporate it into our daily lives, to really live the Exercises beyond the Exercises.

In this conference, we will discuss an important point in the Spiritual Exercises: the rules for making a good choice of a Way of Life. This matters because, as St. Ignatius says, the Spiritual Exercises aim to order one's life. To order my life, I must order my affections so that my heart is not affected by anything. Affected, in the sense that I am hindered from making the decisions that align with the will of God for me. Thus, I must choose and discern in the best possible way, always seeking to do God's will rather than my own. The method that allows me to choose and discern God's will for me is what St. Ignatius proposes, and what in this conference will be discussed.

Before getting into the rules of choice, I want to talk about vocation. (Sorry to those who have chosen their vocation—this helps to reinforce or better understand how to live my vocation with greater commitment).

In the Exercises, often God shows His will and calls. He awakens in the heart the desire to follow Him—the desire for holiness. Holiness will be the response to that call. The choices we need to make to order our life may not be monumental or radically change our lives, but they are decisions to be made in the best possible way. Perhaps someone is deciding a vocation—whether God calls to marriage or to religious consecration—or concrete difficult steps to draw closer to God. These choices may be small. The field of choices is very broad.

How do I know my vocation?

The great question of our life—important and necessary. It is important and necessary to ask: What does the Lord want?

Vocation: “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” (Jn 15:16) It's a call from God. In Latin, *vocare* means “to call,” from which we get “vocation”: it is God who calls, and one responds. He is our Father and Creator, and thus knows perfectly what is best for each of us. He knows where our joy and perfection lie, and as a Father, He always guides us to what is best. It is a call of love. Let us distinguish three calls: To existence (creation); To holiness (redemption); To a particular way of life (personal friendship with God).

MODES OF MAKING A GOOD CHOICE [169–188]

St. Ignatius begins with a preparatory note, clarifying that choice is discerning among good things—not between good and evil. Evil is ruled out immediately.

169. INTRODUCTION TO MAKING A CHOICE OF A WAY OF LIFE

In every good choice, as far as depends on us, our intention must be simple. I must consider only the end for which I am created, that is, for the praise of God our Lord and for the salvation of my soul. Hence, whatever I choose must help me to this end for which I am created.

I must not subject and fit the end to the means, but the means to the end. Many first choose marriage, which is a means, and secondarily the service of God our Lord in marriage, though the service of God is the end. So also others first choose to have benefices (Permanent Church Appointment), and afterwards to serve God in them. Such persons do not go directly to God, but want God to conform wholly to their inordinate attachments. Consequently, they make of the end a means, and of the means an end. As a result, what they ought to seek first, they seek last.

Therefore, my first aim should be to seek to serve God, which is the end, and only after that, if it is more profitable, to have a benefice or marry, for these are means to the end. Nothing must move me to use such means, or to deprive myself of them, save only the service and praise of God our Lord, and the salvation of my soul.

** We have to keep in mind the principle and foundation, that God created us to know, reverence, and serve Him, and this because He loves us and wants us to be happy. This is the foundation, we could say, of discernment. On the other hand, we must be open to His will. It does us no good to say that we're "discerning" something when really the only thing that we want is for God to do what I want. We're making means into an end, and an end into a means. We can't do that! It's the spiritual equivalent of playing Candyland. We must be indifferent, free from inordinate affections.

Otherwise, we can't possibly make a choice well; we might as well light novena candles to Our Lady of Perpetual Discernment and not go anywhere.

[170] Matters About Which a Choice Should Be Made

The purpose of this consideration is to afford information on the matters about which a choice should be made. It contains four points and a note.

First Point

It is necessary that all matters of which we wish to make a choice be either indifferent or good in themselves, and such that they are lawful within our Holy Mother, the hierarchical Church, and not bad or opposed to her.

** Again, there's no debate about whether or not I want to decide to go to Mass on Sunday, or whether or not to murder someone. Those aren't things that are indifferent or good in themselves. However, many things in this life are good: to get married or to enter religious life, or enter the seminary for the diocese or for a religious order, to keep working at my present job, or to cut back some to take up volunteer work. All are good or at least indifferent in themselves. The question is: what does God want?

[171] Second Point

There are things that fall under an unchangeable choice, such as the priesthood, marriage, etc. There are others with regard to which our choice may be changed, for example, to accept or relinquish a benefice, to receive or renounce temporal goods.

** This distinction is important because some decisions I can change and re-examine, but others, not so much.

[172] Third Point

With regard to an unchangeable choice, once it has been made, for instance, by marriage or the priesthood, etc., since it cannot be undone, no further choice is possible. Only this is to be noted. If the choice has not been made as it should have been, and with due order, that is, if it was not made without inordinate attachments, one should be sorry for this, and take care to live well in the life he has chosen.

Since such a choice was inordinate and awry, it does not seem to be a vocation from God, as many erroneously believe. They make a divine call out of a perverse and wicked choice. For every vocation that comes from God is always pure and undefiled, uninfluenced by the flesh or any inordinate attachment.

[173] Fourth Point

In matters that may be changed, if one has made a choice properly and with due order, without any yielding to the flesh or the world, there seems to be no reason why he should make it over. But let him perfect himself as much as possible in the one he has made.

[174] Note

It is to be observed that if a choice in matters that are subject to change has not been made sincerely and with due order, then, if one desires to bring forth fruit that is worthwhile and most pleasing in the sight of God our Lord, it will be profitable to make a choice in the proper way.

THREE “TIMES” WHEN A CORRECT AND GOOD CHOICE OF A WAY OF LIFE MAY BE MADE [175]

St. Ignatius says our soul may be in one of three times:

First Time

When God our Lord so moves and attracts the will that a devout soul without hesitation, or the possibility of hesitation, follows what has been manifested to it. St. Paul and St. Matthew acted thus in following Christ our Lord.

** Fr. Casanovas notes that time here doesn't mean months, weeks, days, or hours, but rather to the diverse spiritual situations in which man might find himself. All are suitable times for making a choice, but each one has a different situation and hence different rules that apply to it. The first thing that calls our attention, says the Jesuit, is the mystical or passive environment of this first time of election. It is really an extraordinary grace, one that calls our attention, and often the impression remains for years after the fact, if it ever goes away. It is extraordinary. God calls, and I answer.

There's no way that I can doubt that it's Him who has called me to do something. The key here is that something is shown or revealed to the individual, the will is invariably drawn to it, moved towards it, and there can be no doubt that it comes from God. Again, in this case, there's no need to wait and see if God does it again (He's not obligated to!). That's it: we've seen and that's that.

The response is still free; it's not that God imposes it on us or makes us do it. Yet, what is shown gives such peace, joy, confidence, direction, and a sense of being loved by God that that impression remains for years after the fact.

Just as a sort of conclusion, though, I think the words of Saint John Bosco merit some consideration (they sort of summarize what we've been saying). He writes: "I think it is a grave mistake to say it's hard to know if you have a vocation or not. The Lord put us in such circumstances that we don't have to do anything more than go forward; we only have to respond to Him. A vocation is difficult to know when one does not want to follow it, when those first inspirations are rejected. It is there that the tangle gets confusing. . . . Look, when a person is indecisive about whether or not to become a religious, I tell you openly that that person already heard their calling; they didn't follow it immediately, and now they find themselves confused and indecisive."

Second Time [176]

When much clarity and understanding are derived through experience of consolations and desolations, and through discerning various spirits.

this helped St. Ignatius's own conversion experience, noticing movements in his soul: those which led to consolations (the way of the cross) and those which led to desolations (vanity, weapons). This experience revealed what God was asking of him.

** In a further document, Ignatius amplifies his description of this second mode:

Among the three modes of making a choice, if God does not move a person in the first mode, one should dwell persistently on the second, that of recognizing his vocation by the experience of consolations and desolations; in such manner that, as he continues with his meditations on Christ our Lord, he observes, when he finds himself in consolation, to which part God moves him [meaning, to which option in the choice], and likewise when he finds himself in desolation. And what consolation is should be well explained: that is, spiritual joy, love, hope in things of above, tears, and every interior movement which leaves the soul consoled in our Lord. The contrary of this is desolation: sadness, lack of confidence, lack of love, dryness, etc.

In reviewing my personal experiences of consolation and desolation, I should ask myself the following: in times of spiritual consolation, to which option do I feel inclined? Has the inclination recurred? Enough so that I can see a clear pattern of inclination? For instance, if I notice that whenever I'm in consolation, I feel the desire to become a priest, and that fills me with joy, but, when I'm in desolation, I feel like there's nothing I'd rather do less than become a priest, probably God wants me to be a priest. Of course, this is a gross simplification of a process that takes time and prayer, but this is the gist of it.

Third Time (A Calm Time) [177]

This is a time of tranquility. One considers first for what purpose man is born, that is, for the praise of God our Lord and for the salvation of his soul. With the desire to attain this before his mind, he chooses as a means to this end a kind of life or state within the bounds of the Church that will be a help in the service of his Lord and for the salvation of his soul. I said it is a time of tranquility, that is, a time when the soul is not agitated by different spirits, and has free and peaceful use of its natural powers.

** Ok, so, now, when there's no clear sign from God, and no consolation and desolation to work with, we come to reason. Remember that our reason, too, is a gift from God, and we need to use it well.

First Way in the Third Time [178–181]

1st Point [178]: This is to place before my mind the object with regard to which I wish to make a choice, for example, an office, or the reception or rejection of a benefice, or anything else that may be the object of a choice subject to change.

** What is it we're trying to discern between (again, they must both be good or at least indifferent in themselves)?

2nd Point [179]: Have as my object the end for which I was created—the praise of God our Lord and the salvation of my soul. Besides this, I must be indifferent, without any inordinate attachment, so that I am not more inclined or disposed to accept the object in question than to relinquish it, nor to give it up than to accept it. I should be like a balance at equilibrium, without leaning to either side, that I might be ready to follow whatever I perceive is more for the glory and praise of God our Lord and for the salvation of my soul.

3rd Point [180]: I should beg God our Lord to deign to move my will, and to bring to my mind what I ought to do in this matter that would be more for His praise and glory. Then I should use the understanding to weigh the matter with care and fidelity, and make my choice in conformity with what would be more pleasing to His most holy will.

4th Point [181] Pros & Cons: This will be to weigh the matter by reckoning the number of advantages and benefits that would accrue to me if I had the proposed office or benefice solely for the praise of God our Lord and the salvation of my soul. On the other hand, I should weigh the disadvantages and dangers there might be in having it. I will do the same with the second alternative, that is, weigh the advantages and benefits as well as the disadvantages and danger of not having it.

**Thinking through and balancing the various aspects of what one wants to choose can be aided by making a table of pros and cons—one for choosing and another for not choosing. Writing it down helps clarify the mind and shows which way the reasoning inclines. We're talking here about spiritual reasons, BUT sometimes when we make this list, we see that some reasons we've given aren't actually that good, and that others reflect something about us, that we're attached to this, that, or the other. Having it written is also useful to show to a confessor or spiritual director.

5th Point [182]: After I have gone over and pondered in this way every aspect of the matter in question, I will consider which alternative appears more reasonable. Then I must come to a decision in the matter under deliberation because of weightier motives presented to my reason, and not because of any sensual inclination.

6th Point [183]: After such a choice or decision, the one who has made it must turn with great diligence to prayer in the presence of God our Lord, and offer Him his choice that the Divine Majesty may deign to accept and confirm it if it is for His greater service and praise.

Second Way [184–187]

Keeping in mind the same first 3 points as in the First Way, then:

2nd Rule [185]: I should represent to myself a man whom I have never seen or known, and whom I would like to see practice all perfection. Then I should consider what I would tell him to do and choose for the greater glory of God our Lord and the greater perfection of his soul. I will do the same, and keep the rule I propose to others.

** This little exercise does two things: first, it helps us to view the situation more objectively, but Ignatius also knows that it's easier for us to give advice than to take it! Hence, oftentimes looking at things this way really helps us to decide what it is we should do.

3rd Rule [186]: This is to consider what procedure and norm of action I would wish to have followed in making the present choice if I were at the moment of death. I will guide myself by this and make my decision entirely in conformity with it.



4th Rule [187]: Consider how I will be at the Day of Judgment: how I would then have wished to have deliberated about the present matter, and take that rule now, so that then I may find myself with complete pleasure and joy.

Put yourself before Christ the Judge. What would I like to say? With what would I like to present myself before Him? With what I chose—or with what I passed by?

Often it helps to ask advice from a spiritual director (if one has one), especially if it's a very important choice in our life. Once the choice has been made, present it to God with courage and total trust. Sometimes God asks us to close our eyes and jump into the void with trust—choosing everything for the greater glory of God, knowing we are in His hands and He guides our steps, even if our choice brings a cross. Entrust your choice, and do so through the maternal hands of our Blessed Mother Mary.