

FINDING GOD: A Spirituality of Decision Making

Do you ever find yourself saying:

“My life seems to be in a rut, and I can’t move forward.”

“I’d love to be able to make good decisions consistently.”

“Things just happen to me: I seem to have no personal power or responsibility.”

“Life is too big for me. I’m not important, and I’ve no effect on what goes on.”

“I do try to make right decisions, but how can I know that God is pleased with them?”

Inner peace, energy and happiness depend on making good decisions. Ignatian spirituality helps people all over the world to make them well. *But what is Ignatian spirituality?*

Ignatius: St Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) spent his life learning how to make good decisions in the fast-changing scene of the Reformation and the discovery of the New World. As one of the great ‘movers and shakers’ of his time, his goal was to find God in all things. His influence has developed rather than lessened over the past 500 years, for he has much wisdom to offer us as we search for God in the whirlwind of contemporary life.

Spirituality: Spirituality focuses on the *dynamic and concrete* character of your relationship to God in actual life situations. It concerns your *religious experience*, rather than issues of faith or morality. Thus, Celtic spirituality asks: ‘How did the Celts relate to God?’ The spirituality of suffering asks: ‘How can I relate to God in what I am enduring?’ Spirituality in a New Age asks: *‘How can I relate my life to God in the 21st century?’*

YOU ARE IMPORTANT!

Ignatian spirituality helps us to make dynamic connections between the three great realities that make up our lives:

- ourselves,
- our world, and
- our God.

This is where good decision making is vital. Life is shaped by decisions. In making them, we must respect ourselves, the needs of our neighbour, and the intentions of our God. Then we can live out our lives fully and richly in the concrete. No decision we make is unimportant to God.

Do you believe that you – just as you are right now - are a remarkable person, who has an extraordinary treasure within you? No matter how badly you may feel about yourself, you are limitlessly loved and special to God. ‘God doesn’t do junk!’ God has dreams for you. God respects your present reality and invites you to develop at your own pace, and Ignatian spirituality helps you to take *your* next feasible step into an open world.

Ignatian spirituality proposes that

- You’re important to God and to God’s world right now;
- You have unique gifts, imagination and creativity;
- You have a special role to play in the drama of human history;
- God respects every decision you make, whether good or bad!

Ignatian spirituality is person-centred! Its focus is on *you*, rather than on saying prayers or performing devotions, good though these may be. It asks you instead: **‘What are you doing with your life right now?’**

DIRECT ENCOUNTER

Ignatian spirituality maintains that God deals *directly* with you, as well as dealing with you through others and through the events that touch your life. God draws you to what is true and good and loving, through your imagination, your feelings and desires, your needs, your talents and your energy. God sets up events in your life and you respond. Ignatius admits that God dealt with him like a school-teacher with a rather dull student. He slowly caught on to what God had in mind for him. He was 50 when he founded the Jesuits, and he died at 65! So take yourself gently, but keep in touch with God, and let yourself be led. Ignatius was ‘Someone led by Another.’ I would be nice if that could be said of each of us.

God is active in all events and gives you the capacity to respond rightly to them. God waits, breathlessly and intently, as you move to your decisions. Even if you make a bad decision, God will respect it. God won’t reverse a decision you make, but will work to bring some new good out of it. Not easy! A 17-year old became pregnant. She knew she couldn’t manage to care for the child. Her partner proposed an abortion. No, that wouldn’t be right, she felt. The partner left. Her parents came to the rescue, at great personal cost, and reared the child. There are many decisions here. God prompts the good ones, and wrestles with the bad ones. God looks out for help and engages good people to limit the damage of a bad choice. So God gets us to carry one another along: You may find someone stepping in when you go wrong, and you in turn may come to the rescue of someone else. So we get by together, with God’s help.

Instead of thinking that God finished the work of creation quite some time ago, you are invited to think of God as creating all the time. You and everyone else are invited to partner God in the work of creating the world of tomorrow.

Through reflective living you can become sensitive to the ways God touches your heart and inspires your mind. You can develop a discerning heart as you make your way along. You can be guided by the Good Spirit to find God more and more easily. There are no limits to the intimacy and creativity which can grow when two hearts are in harmony – yours and God’s!

A DIVINE COMPANION

In the Gospels we find Jesus gathering disciples: they were to be his life-companions. In his final conversation with them before his Passion, he emphasised that they were not his servants but *his friends*, and that the relationship which had grown between them and him was to continue even when he seemed absent. He promised that he would in fact always be with them, and he invited them to draw life and energy constantly from their relationship with him. This invitation is extended to us also today. We are to carry out our life tasks in companionship with Jesus. The friendship he offers is the same as he offered his first companions. Friendship connotes heart-knowledge which leads to intimate love and therefore to following.

This sense of companionship is the foundation of genuine Christian discernment. This means that I make my choices, not isolated and fearfully, but in the company of Someone who cares deeply about what I do. This person will help me. I can turn to him in trust and say: ‘Let’s work on this together!’

You can meet regularly with Jesus in the privacy of your heart. It also helps a lot at other times to meet him in company. The first disciples must often have forgotten that they had a divine companion to turn to. So they made mistakes. But when they gathered together they would have started talking about Jesus and what he was like, what his values and vision were. They reminded one another of him, and so the gospels got written! Each disciple had a unique relationship with him, so when they shared this, they were given new heart and renewed vision. This got them back on track, like pilgrims on the Camino pilgrimage who gather in the evenings around a meal, talk about the day's journey done and what route to take tomorrow. Pilgrims watch out for one another. This is what a 'church' means: it is an assembly of like-minded people. The Christian Church is a group of disciples gathered around Jesus their Leader. They sing, they talk, they share a meal. He, their Leader, provides the food and drink, his very self. They are given new heart and vision. They decide together about the way forward. This is what the Eucharist is about.

SERVING YOUR WORLD

Ignatian spirituality is a spirituality of *active service*. The forms of service are limitless, but they centre on the development of *good relationships between persons*. All reality is relational – so the scientists tell us - and we humans are meant to relate also. Our relationships are meant to mirror nothing less than the relationships between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They get along very well together and are totally happy with each other! So wherever we can improve relationships – at home, in the neighbourhood, the parish, the workplace, the UN – we are building up the kind of world God wishes for us all.

However, fostering good relationships in a broken world is a gigantic task. Think of genocides, world wars, greed, and domination by the powerful over the weaker. But healthy relationships remain the divine agenda! Always on Jesus' mind were love, forgiveness, respect, sharing, compassion. In short, he was **FOR** people and wanted people to be **FOR** one another! Through contemplative companionship with him we catch on to his attitudes. '*Contemplative companionship*' means that I spend time watching Jesus lovingly. I look at the world with his eyes, I feel for people with his heart. This is what prayer should often be about: *taking a long, loving look, with Jesus, at the real around me*.

Ignatian spirituality proposes that the Holy Spirit is close to us, deep in our hearts. The Spirit nudges us steadily in the right direction, so that we come to play our role well in God's world. When we are 'on our thread' we experience peace, confidence, joy, authenticity, even though we might be taking on some demanding task, such as standing against injustice. When we're off track, we sense ourselves disturbed, unsure, fragmented, untrue to our best selves, and focussed inward rather than outward.

We believe that the Father, Son and Spirit are intensely focussed on our world with all its problems; they are actively involved in it, and they look around the world in search of people who will be FOR others. Ignatius uses a homely image: *we are to be sensitive and pliable instruments in the divine hands*. Just imagine a surgeon whose instruments suddenly started doing their own thing in the middle of an operation! But that's what happens when we focus solely on ourselves. If human history is a mess, it is because people decide that they want to '*do it my way*'.

DIVINE DREAMS

God's project for our world is an *open* one: it is anything but fixed and static. God is full of imagination: think of mice and giraffes, crocs and crocuses! God gets bored with mindless repetition. God's dream is more like the game-plan of a football coach than an architect's detailed plan for a house. A team tries to take into account all the variables created by the guile and craft of the opposition. The greater the depth of resources in the team, the better it can adapt to change. The openness of world process requires that often our decisions will have to be made in uncertainty and be frequently revised. But throughout our lives, we are to act *as wisely and lovingly as we can*. We are to believe, as Jesus did, that what is deepest and best in us is good enough for God. We are to stop regularly and ask God: 'What will we do now?' In this way we become God's collaborators. God labours in our world, deciding to do what is wisest and best in every situation. We try to do likewise. The salvation of the world is a corporate event!

IN TUNE WITH LOVE

How do you see the world? Is it neatly ordered, with pre-arranged paths set down for each person? Or is it open – as open as the expanding universe of which our planet is a tiny part? How did Jesus view the world and his life in it? Did he see beforehand that suffering and death were his inevitable destiny? Or was he like us in all things, so that he found himself continually having to make choices? Was he often unsure, puzzled, confused and even frightened? Did he experience regret, as we do, over decisions made in good faith, but which did not work out, as in his choice of Judas?

In the gospels we see a person trying to make choices that are appropriate to the emerging situations in which he finds himself. These situations often come about due to the conflict between his values and those of others. When Jesus says, "I always do what pleases him" (Jn 8:29) he does not mean that he simply does what the Father has planned for him. Rather, he means that in all the choices which confront him, he acts out of altruistic love and wisdom. While he must often have been perplexed and unsure, what keeps him going is his conviction that he must be busy, not with his own but with his Father's affairs. He believes that his Father both loves him limitlessly and that the Father wants him to show the same extravagant love to all the human family. This is what Revelation is about, this is his agenda, the task given to him. How is it to be achieved is not set out beforehand. It requires a consistent responding to the demands of wisdom and love in the emerging circumstances of life.

The consequences of his choices and discernments bring him to the passion. At this point occurs the final choice of his life. Instead of trying to escape, or to endure his death in bitter resentment and hatred, he chooses to accept the cross in self-sacrificing love for the good of us all. Thus he reveals the existence of a love which embraces all the evil of the world. This is the love that is given to me, and it is intended for extravagant sharing. It is not for myself alone.

CHOOSING WELL

Ignatian spirituality focuses on the making of good decisions. What Ignatius would want for us is ‘*discerning love*’ – that is, all our decisions should flow from a wise love. Solomon in the Old Testament asked for a ‘discerning heart’ and so can we.

This discerning, or well-thought out love, is not easy to come by. But with practice it becomes more spontaneously the pattern of our lives, so that while remaining our very *human* selves we can live out a life of close intimacy with the *divine* persons. This is what Christian living is meant to be about. On the surface such a life may seem to be very ordinary, but there is nothing ordinary about it at all! It is a remarkable thing to come across people who make statements like:

“I do the best I can. I try to put God and other people first.”

“I often don’t know what to do. So I turn to God and sometimes read a bit of the gospels, and then things get clearer.”

“There were lots of things in my life that I would have wanted different. But they were the way they were, and all I could do was put up with them patiently and with as much love as I could dredge up.”

Jesus could have made these very statements. His life has no fixed pattern. He is the one who is pre-eminently led by the Spirit, and the Spirit which “blows where it will” leads him into an extraordinary variety of situations. The one constant in his life is that he puts the Father and the Father’s plans for the world first. We are invited to do the same. But we are free. The Good News is all about love and freedom. However, when you put these together, there emerges *a responsibility for others, born of love*. God entrusts us to one another. My neighbours are God’s friends, God’s beloveds, so they must be mine also! It is love of this sort that keeps the world from sliding into total chaos.

GOD AMONG US

The God of Ignatian spirituality is not only the God of the tabernacle, the sanctuary or the cloister, but is God among us, God of the everyday, of the ordinary, of the marketplace and the Stock Exchange. In becoming human, God ‘moves house’ and becomes God-with-us. In Jesus God is with his people; he is as vulnerable and unsafe as they are. Paul is told as he goes to persecute the Damascus Christians, ‘I am Jesus and you are persecuting ME.’ He takes very personally how we treat our needy neighbour: ‘You’re doing that to ME!’ God is close.

Ignatian spirituality does not float above our messy world but is earthed among people, wherever and however they may be. It embraces the poor. It stands with the marginalised and the victims of our world. It expresses a faith that seeks to do justice. It animates us to work for human development because God desires dignity for all people. Where our instinct is to bypass the poor, the drop-outs, the wrecks of humanity, Ignatian spirituality challenges us with the simple but shattering truth that *everyone is to be loved*.

Because it is sympathetic to the human condition, Ignatian spirituality is flexible in regard to structures and institutions. These are necessary because we are social beings, but they are not ends in themselves. They are to be adapted and transformed continuously so that they may truly serve the good of the people. This includes the Church, which as Vatican Two says, is *always in need of reform*.

KEEPING GOD IN VIEW

Ignatian spirituality has one major theme: that we should *keep God always before our eyes*. We are to touch base with God in everything we intend to do. This will involve:

- ❖ Time spent alone with God in order to be won over to God's values and attitudes, as shown dramatically in the life of Jesus;
- ❖ Time for reflection with Jesus on how the day went; planning with him the decisions to be made for the next day;
- ❖ Times for sharing with others. Salvation is not a private but a group event. Hence the importance of the prayer group, the parish, the Eucharist; we survive by solidarity;
- ❖ A developing openness to God's presence everywhere – in nature, in people, in beauty, in the good things that come our way. But also in the challenging situations: here Ignatius would have us ask: '*What ought I do to help people here?*'

In this perspective, life and prayer merge. When we undertake an activity out of belief that God wishes it of us, this is *living prayer*, prayer in action. Life no longer has two parts. My ordinary life and my life with God become unified.

Ignatian spirituality recognises too how easily we can be misled. We can be motivated subtly by our own needs rather than the needs of others. The Ignatian *Review of Consciousness* comes in here. It is not an introverted exercise but a time for noticing the moods of consolation and desolation which play upon our spirits. It uncovers our blind spots and shadows and enables us to see where the movements of our hearts are taking us. Spiritual guidance can help us to interpret what is going on.

A BEAUTIFUL RISK

It was Plato who said that life is a risk, but a beautiful risk. To live a life in God's companionship is certainly to embrace a life of risk. Ignatian spirituality carries a health warning! But it encourages a person to begin a journey into the freedom and joy which is the very life of God. It invites us to seek and find and seek again. It emphasises the divine dimension hidden in our human experiences. In our mistakes and failures we can learn how to proceed better the next time. Those who allow themselves to be caught up into this way of living find themselves in the company of the God of Surprises. Together with God they plan what to do next. They find themselves neither drifting through life in a bored way, nor being dragged violently into something for which they have no desire. Rather they find harmony, the harmony of two sets of desires, divine and human. God and yourself focus on one common concern, the gathering of all humankind into the final community of love. Life then becomes a great and exciting adventure.

The following reflection sums up Ignatian spirituality:

“Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, than falling in love in an absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the mornings, what you will do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with love and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.” – *Attributed to Pedro Arrupe, former Superior General of the Jesuits.*

Note: There are many websites which will open up Ignatian spirituality for you, such as www.sacredspace.ie; www.ignatianspirituality.com, etc..