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Discerning a post-Covid future with St Ignatius of Loyola

“It is not the time of your judgement, but of our judgement: a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not.”¹ As parishes emerge from post-Covid hibernation, Pope Francis’ *Urbi et Orbi* message challenges us to choose what must pass away and what remain, so that normal business will not resume in abnormal times.

As we wrestle with the new challenges – theological, pastoral, practical – we can turn to a deep and reliable source hugely influential upon the Pope himself: the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. I would like to highlight particular moments in the Exercises which can inspire parishes to shape their future with faith and courage.

The Principle and Foundation

The Exercises begin with what is called the Principle and Foundation. With deep optimism and trust in God, this passage declares that, “*Everything* has the potential of calling forth in us a more loving response to our life forever with God.”² The ‘everything’ which Ignatius is referring to here are specifically the crises of life: sickness, poverty, failure and even death: faced with these, we should not seek to avoid them, but maintain a spiritual balance (‘indifference’), with our only aim and choice being, “what better leads to God’s deepening life in me.”³ So a crisis such as the one imposed by Covid is an opportunity, allowing us to refocus all our energies and goals to the basic loving response of discipleship. Such a ‘streamlining’ has pastoral and structural consequences for parishes, and calls for efficient parish structures in which, “customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.”⁴

Discernment

How are parishes to develop such structures? The principle of subsidiarity, and the Pope’s repeated call for a synodal Church, impel us to find solutions which are discerned locally.

What is discernment, a word so central to the Exercises and to Ignatian spirituality? Put simply, it is, “The art of appreciating the gifts that God has given us, and discovering how we might best respond to that love in daily life”⁵ For Ignatius, an awareness of the Lord’s call emerges from a careful attentiveness to the pattern of consolations and desolations which the community (or individual) perceives over time. By consolations he means deep inner feelings of peace, balance, growth, creativity, and a desire for closeness with God and service of others. By contrast, desolation brings restlessness, listlessness, and that which “draws us away from God and things which have to do with God, and to lead us to be self-centred, closed in and unconcerned with other people”⁶ Desolation as described here is strikingly reminiscent of Pope Francis’ warning to the Church in his speech at the consistory which elected him Pope: a self-referential church which is closed on itself becomes listless and sick.

Ignatius trusts that God’s grace will lead us to discern the pattern of consolation and desolation, and move in the direction indicated by sustained consolation. In a parish setting, discernment will be applied to questions such as: Where is God leading this parish post-Covid? What are the spiritual and practical needs of our parish and wider community, and how can we respond with creativity and courage? Critical to this ‘discernment of spirits’ between consolation and desolation is the question of *who* is asking the questions, and *how* the discernment is undertaken.

Who should discern, and how?

Ignatius insists that wise discernment happen within prayer, hence why the life decisions undertaken in the Exercises take place the midst of weeks spent contemplating the mysteries of Jesus' ministry and passion. In essence, discernment means, "taking seriously the need to pray over each decision,"⁷ while Pope Francis calls it, "a gift which we must implore."⁸ This will entail all decisions being taken in an atmosphere of prayer, with the wider parish community being asked to pray for wisdom and guidance ahead of an important decision: might the housebound be entrusted with this as a special charism?

Turning to *who* should exercise pastoral discernment in parish life, key is Ignatius' insistence on the need consult others. When I remain alone in discerning, I can be prey to confusion, self-interest, laziness and all the wiles of the evil one. Ignatius is convinced that we can easily be deceived by the devil as we discern the right path (like Pope Francis, he is unabashed in naming the ancient enemy). To counteract this, I must place my dilemmas before, "an objective other"⁹ who can give wise counsel.

In the parish, the pastor has moral and canonical oversight of the parish and a sacred responsibility to act with wisdom. It is therefore key that a group of parishioners accompany him on the path of discernment. This should be a wisely-chosen, outward-looking group, refreshed frequently in order to avoid a, "clericalisation of pastoral activity"¹⁰, but rather able to, "represent the community of which it is an expression"¹¹. As noted, the Exercises recommend that a communal discernment process with 'objective others' will be more reliable, benefitting from a wider vision, and less prey to narrow agendas and concerns. The process will be 'aerated' rather than stale, with an openness to fresh insights and future possibilities. The limitations of each participant will be balanced by the wisdom and strength of the others: in particular, the powerful vision of Pope St John Paul II regarding the complementarity of the sexes can inspire a gender balance essential to effective decision making. A variety of lay parishioners will bring a greater awareness of the needs of the community, with the potential for more creative solutions to emerge (e.g. initiatives which respond to the realities family life and working life). A further Ignatian-inspired advantage of group discernment is that reasons for and against a particular course of action can be researched, weighed and discussed in a collegial way by people exercising their professional and personal gifts.

Finally, Ignatius insists that wise decisions should receive confirmation in some way once they are taken, often in the form of fresh consolation. Where this is not forthcoming, he enjoins us to have the humility to change course. The fruits of discernment should therefore be subject to confirmation by the whole parish via some form of accountability. Regular parish surveys and interaction via social media can encourage this, as well as transparency regarding who is part of the decision-making process. Decisions can be reviewed in the light of feedback, and adapted or changed accordingly.

Conclusion

The perceptive, faith-filled insights of the Spiritual Exercises continue to provide fresh impetus to the Church at all levels. At this specific time in history when pastors and faithful alike are open to change, yet are aware of the need to build on wisdom of the past, Ignatius emboldens us towards a, "holy audacity,"¹² discerning the future together in an atmosphere of prayer, with complete faith in God, and rooted in Jesus Christ and his Kingdom. At a time of unprecedented anxiety, we are invited to cast out into the deep, trusting in the perfect love which casts out fear as we, "recognize the paths that lead to complete freedom."¹³

¹ Pope Francis, Extraordinary Moment of Prayer and Urbi ei Orbi, Friday, 27 March 2020.

² Fleming, D. L. (1996). *Draw Me Into Your Friendship: The Spiritual Exercises*, p. 27. Italics mine.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: On the proclamation of the Gospel in today's world*, 27.

⁵ Lonsdale, D. (1990). *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality*. London: DLT, p. 64.

⁶ Ibid, p. 71.

⁷ Martin, J. (2010). *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life*. New York: HarperOne, p. 305.

⁸ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exultate: On the Call to Holiness in Today's World*, 166.

⁹ O'Donnell, J. (1995). *Prayer in the Catechism: An Ignatian Approach*. New York: Geoffrey Chapman, p. 71.

¹⁰ Congregation for the Clergy (2020). Instruction "The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church", 38.

¹¹ Ibid, 112.

¹² Ibid, 124.

¹³ *Gaudete et Exultate* 168.