

A Paper on *Three Times (Modes) for Choice*

Clearing the Decks

1. The Three Modes

All three modes are equally valid and graced. None is better than another, though the default order is mode 1 then 2 then 3. We may hope for a thunderbolt from heaven (Mode 1) but this is neither the only nor the most privileged way.

We do not necessarily choose which mode to employ when making a decision. Rather, we are more likely to find ourselves in a particular Mode and Ignatius gives us guidelines – to some extent – to aid us in discernment within that Mode.

Discernment usually does not take place in a vacuum; we gather as much information as is available.

2. Feelings

The word “feeling” is a multi-valent word with meaning depending upon context. Examples that people use are:

- physical sensation and perception (my hands feel hot; your skin feels smooth)
- degree of well-being (I feel sick)
- emotion (I feel happy)
- intuition (I feel you are hiding something)
- hypothesis (I feel she is supportive of you)
- the experience of the graces of faith, hope and love (hereafter, “f-h-l”) (I trust you, Jesus)

Most feelings are not “spiritual” inasmuch as they are not to do with the relationship with God. Nevertheless, all these feelings are important and contribute to life in God. They are to be welcomed for what they teach us and more importantly because they are of life.

The feelings of spiritual consolation and desolation are to do with the changing sense and quality of trust in and love of God; they are distinct but not divorced from sensible feelings.

3. Humanity

All of our human powers – reason, feelings, body sensations, intuition, memory, understand and will, our availability for Grace, and so on – are present in all three modes. None of these is absent in any discernment. So, particularly, Mode 3 is not only about reason. However, it is particular experiences that form the evidence for Modes 1 and 2.

4. Divinity

We use the question, “Where is God in all this?” While clearly a question that gets us thinking and may help to connect us with God present in life, it is also wrong-headed for a number of reasons:

- God is everywhere, even (or perhaps specially) in the darkest places. Directees do sometimes make this response.
- An apophatic would say that God is ‘other’ and cannot be ‘found’ – God is not an object in the Universe whose position can be pointed to.
- In discernment, it is not God, but God’s will that is sought.
- Here’s the nub of it! Spiritual consolation and desolation are not about finding or losing (the sense of) God, or about God being present or absent. They are about the increase or decrease of f-h-l. So, one may feel (emotionally? physically?) utterly separated from God yet continue to trust and love God (spiritual consolation).

So, perhaps better questions may be, “Where is God for *you* in all this?” or “Where do *you* experience God in all this?” Perhaps most accurately for discernment of spirits (Mode 2), the best question is “When do you trust God more?” i.e. “When do you have a spiritual consolation?”

First Mode

Ignatius outlines three pieces of evidence:

- something is shown;
- God attracts the will;
- there is no doubt.

Feeling good about what is shown and/or a feeling of spiritual consolation may be present but is not required. Particularly, this Mode is not equivalent to *Consolation Without Previous Cause*, though that may also occur.

A person will have thoughts and feelings – consoling and desolating – about what is shown. These are important *and* they do not change the discernment.

What is shown is distinct from what follows. While there is clarity of discernment about some matter, subsequently (like St Paul) one may be thrown into confusion about consequent choices and actions.

Second Mode = place of Discernment of Spirits

There is the distinction between *sensible* consolation or desolation – feeling happy or sad, loving or fearful, peaceful or agitated, harmonious or angry, etc – and *spiritual* consolation or desolation – to do with the changing degree of trust in God.

The bottom-line question here is, “When do I have a spiritual consolation – an increase of f-h-l?”

Though we continue to have all of our human feeling and thinking active in this Mode (and should not ignore it for all the world), the evidence being sifted is not finally that of our emotions and thoughts and so on, but spiritual consolations and desolations: how is my sense of faith, hope and love in/for God being affected?

Third Mode

The bottom-line question here is, “What is for the greatest glory of God?” or “What is the best act of love (for all concerned, including me) in this situation?”

Ignatius calls this a time of tranquillity, i.e.

- there are no movements of f-h-l (presumably, though, one is trusting in God!);
- I am ok in myself, e.g. not hungry, angry, lonely or tired, etc.

The evidence being sifted, e.g. in the various pros and cons, is all of our normal human powers of reason, emotion, intuition and so on.

Combination & Confirmation

Although Mode 1 stands alone – something is shown and there is no doubting – Modes 2 and 3 can helpfully be combined, each giving evidence and confirmation for the other.