OIS Presentation: "Growing as Contemplatives in Action"

It's very good to be with you this morning. I must confess that I really enjoy being in the company of fellow spiritual directors and retreat directors. And that's because our ministry is unique in the Church. It is unique, isn't it? Our principal task is not to instruct folks, or catechize them, or preach to them. Our principal task is to accompany them, and assist them, in their desire to grow more intimate with God-source-of-all, with Jesus Christ, and with the Holy Spirit, and to aid them, as well, in their desire to become more generous and discerning collaborators with the Trinity in God's project in the world.

The Office of Ignatian Spirituality sees this morning's workshop as its first effort, as the OIS, to bring directors together for mutual support. Spiritual direction is often a rather solitary ministry, except for the times when the practitioners meet for peer supervision. I hope that all the participants in this morning's conference will experience encouragement in the Lord by our being together and exploring fundamental themes in this ministry.

I do want to say at the very beginning that I do not want to make any assumptions about what your directees and retreatants bring up during their sessions with you. They may be ecstatic about the new administration in Washington and want to find additional ways of thanking God for it. They might be in despair about what's going on in the nation's capital and want help to keep their eyes on God and what God is up to in our world. Or they might not bring up politics and governance at all, but be struggling with family or work issues, or challenges in personal growth, and want help bringing those matters of concern into their relationship with God.

So--no assumptions. Which means that what I need to focus on is some basic themes of spiritual and retreat direction, so that we might gather around them, perhaps add or modify what I say about them, but, in any case--I hope!--find nourishment and support as we return to our ministries.

My exploration will--no surprise!--proceed in three parts.

First, I want to consider contemplativeness as the heart of our ministries of ongoing direction and retreat work.

Secondly, I will look at some fundamentals regarding discernment of spirits as a way folks can grow in contemplativeness.

Thirdly, we'll examine the Ignatian "times" of election as privileged ways of coinciding with God's project in the world.

I Contemplativeness

I found myself drawn more to “contemplativeness” than to “contemplation” as I prepared this presentation. I am more concerned with an attitude or a stance, whereas “contemplation” very often names a certain way of praying. I hope the reason for this choice becomes apparent as I proceed.

I am going to understand this term—contemplativeness--in two distinct but interrelated senses.

The first sense can be expressed in various ways. Walter Burghardt famously defined contemplativeness as a “long loving look at the real.” For others contemplativeness is the savoring of that which I love. For yet others it is paying attention in a way that lets me be affected deeply by the other on the other’s terms. I could multiply definitions or descriptors, but all of them would have this in common: the experience conjured up is not one that ordinarily involves sending or receiving a tweet!

In our digitally charged world, the need for contemplativeness is profound.

My ministry as a spiritual director over the past forty-plus years has convinced me now more than ever that the movement from self-reflection, self-analysis, self-judgment, and categorization of people and situations, to a stance of noticing the other, letting oneself be affected by the other on the other’s terms, and then responding to the other after being thus affected, is an awesome movement, a monumental movement, however simply or profoundly it occurs at any particular time.

The reason I am paid the big bucks as a spiritual director (“surely, Brian, you must be kidding!”) is that, after the person in the room with me has spoken about their past month’s experiences and events, I get to ask the disarming question: “And did you notice God or Jesus or the Spirit during this past month, and, if so, what did you notice and how did it affect you?”

I still remember a directee many years ago with whom I was working who was extraordinarily distracted in his daily life. Not that he seemed to need therapy, but he did need to address the issue of contemplativeness even before getting into the issue of his relationship with God. So I invited the person to begin to contemplate his feet and his hands. I asked him to let these servants of his, so regularly employed and so little appreciated, to speak to him about themselves. To let them have their voice, and to try to listen with loving appreciation to what they might want to say to him.

It took some time, but he entered into a new connection with his hands and his feet, and began to value the contemplative relationship that was emerging. He soon discovered that his hands and feel seemed to like being appreciated, after so many years of being taken for granted.

After a while, he was able to move to contemplating Jesus in Gospel passages as Jesus showed himself in his spontaneous imagining. So it all turned out well. (You didn’t think I would tell you a story where it didn’t work out, did you?)

I’d like to make a plug at this point. Over these many years, I have accompanied many folks and I have taught spiritual direction in various settings. My basic text in all this has been William Barry and William Connolly’s *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*. There are many fine works out there about direction but I believe that book is unsurpassed as a primer. Their chapter on “Fostering the Contemplative Attitude,” for example, is a classic.

Bill Barry was my spiritual director for many years. Bill’s training as a clinical psychologist had alerted him to the manifold ways in which we humans habitually perceive and evaluate persons and situations through the lenses of pre-given schemata, products of our upbringing and our previous experience, as well as of our fears and prejudices. He appreciated how difficult it is for reality to come into us with its own voice, on its own terms. Openness to the other on the other’s terms entails, of course, a certain degree of vulnerability on the part of the perceiver. If a person’s fear of openness to the other is very powerful, even for good reasons, therapy may be called for rather than spiritual direction. But the authors make clear that a certain healthy degree of openness to the real is a *sine qua non* for anyone who wishes to foster the contemplative attitude.

To contemplate is to choose to place oneself in the presence of the other with the desire to be, in one degree or another, formed, shaped, molded, affected by the other. There is implicit in contemplativeness the confidence that the other has something to offer me but that what is being offered needs to come to me, as much as possible, as the other wishes to communicate it.

Growing contemplativeness can also awaken in me a consoling sense of learning something new and fresh, something that comes to me as gift.

When I’m teaching spiritual direction courses I ask the students at one point to contemplate something for four ten-minute sessions prior to the next class. It can be their morning coffee mug, or a tree outside their window, or a photo of a loved one. They are to use the same object all four times, setting a timer so that they don’t have to worry about the time. After each session, they are to take some notes about their experience: what happened during that time.

Again and again it is striking how difficult it is for the students to be contemplative during that time. They are drawn naturally to focus on the object, to notice aspects of it, but then they move into associative thinking *about* the object. They have a devil of a time simply becoming absorbed in the object and relishing, savoring, more and more, the color, textures and other features of the object before them. They inevitably move from noticing to thinking, rather than moving from superficial or initial noticing to deeper, or more detailed, noticing of the very same object.

The point I am making here is very basic for those who have been engaged in this ministry for a good while, but all my experience as a spiritual director confirms the primal need for this contemplative attitude if one is to deepen relationship with the other.

The “being affected by the other on the other’s terms” is a place where we want all of our spiritual directees to be at each step of their journey with the Lord. This experience can take the form of being taken up into a Gospel scene in which the individual allows Jesus to wash his feet. It can also take the form of sitting in reverent and receptive silence in centering prayer, without any sense of how God is affecting the individual in his depths.

In Saint Teresa of Avila’s terms, centering prayer is a form of active recollection and can lead to what she called “the prayer of quiet.” Centering prayer can be the form a person’s prayer takes for the whole of her life. But this deceptively simple stance can lead, by God’s choosing, to prayer that is increasingly God’s initiative, where there are no road markers or recognizable contours. At a certain point of growth the dark night of the senses can begin. This consists of God purifying the ways I have related to God and the world through my senses; they now more and more subordinated to, and integrated with, my graced self. At this stage my religious rituals, devotions, prayer forms, the ordinary routines of the day, even human friendships and the form that friendship with God has taken up until now, become sources of painful disappointment. Why? Because they are not identical with the living God, and because up until now I have invested in them hints, or more than hints, of idolatry, through my disordered attachment to them.

Contemplativeness now means letting God have God’s way with me. The dark night of the senses can yield to the dark night of spirit, when God blinds me with divine light and dries me up with divine fire. At this stage, God transforms my graced spirit into Christ. Even more than in the dark night of the senses, I find no refuge in my memory of past graces or past consolations. I find no resting place in my accustomed sense of my self, my identity. I begin to become a stranger to myself, and all that surrounds me begins to be strange, alien. What used to be home is no longer home. God is purifying me in my conscious self and in my unconscious self, a region to which only God has access.

I am being pulled into the sea of God and it could be described as “drowning” except for the exceeding dryness that I am experiencing.

 The Holy Spirit is uniting me with Christ so intimately that Christ is taking over my selfhood. I am growing into his relational identity. But none of this is occurring in my daily, “day-light” consciousness, and so I derive no support, in the ordinary sense of the term, from what God is doing.

Yet, on the other hand, I sense that I must surrender to this process and let it go its way. I have no real choice. Oh, I still have my freedom, my power of self-determination. But there is no other real alternative that promises me what I am deeply seeking at this point.

This is the darkness that is to be trusted and surrendered to, so unlike the spiritual desolation of which St. Ignatius writes, which originates in our false self and to which we must act in contrary fashion.

The dark nights involve the purification of the person down to the roots of his or her disorder. But they also involve the divine “stretching” of the finite creature, so that it can become, more and more, capable of God, “capax Dei.” (Iain Matthew has written a very accessible and touching introduction to the dark nights.)

Thus far I have been speaking about the development of contemplativeness in the spiritual directee. But that is not the whole story by a long shot. The spiritual director, the accompanier, is called to contemplativeness as well.

Beyond the basic but all-important listening skills, the spiritual director needs to bring a profound “tuning fork” to the directee. That “tuning fork” is the spiritual director’s own contemplativeness, to God, to the spiritual directee as one in whom God is acting, and to the spiritual director’s own interiority. The directee plucks various lute strings in the director that derive from the director’s past experience. But, more than that, the directee’s communication of connectedness with God or disconnectedness with God touches into the director’s own relationship with God. There can be deep resonance or dissonance between what and how the spiritual directee is communicating and the God-wardness of the spiritual director. If the directee communicates a sense of spiritual desolation, that can affect the director in a noticeable way, and the director can work with that, offering the hypothesis that the directee may be experiencing this movement originating in the false self.

If the directee is experiencing either of the dark nights, the deep contemplativeness of the director—supported by some good knowledge of John of the Cross—can vibrate, as it were, with the spiritual state of the directee who longs for God but now feels so frustrated by God.

I do not want to conclude this section without naming a very special dimension of the ministry of spiritual direction that is implicit in all that I have written thus far. It consists in this: the spiritual director gets to send the spiritual directee back to God, again and again, for the individual to discover for themselves who and what God wants to be for them at this time in their lives, to discover for themselves how God feels about them just as they are right now, and to discover for themselves what God’s will for them is here and now.

What a marvelously subversive ministry!

I now want to turn to a second understanding of “contemplativeness.”

I would like to refer to the great grace the founder of my religious community, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, received from God. Jerome Nadal, one of the early Jesuits who was close to Ignatius, summed it up in what is now a classic phrase in Ignatian circles: “being contemplative likewise in action”—*contemplativus simul in actione.*  What he was saying was that Ignatius was gifted to be able to be contemplative in formal prayer and likewise in all other activities and passivities of his life, from washing his face, to eating his supper, to traveling from one city to another, to writing letters to distant parts, to suffering illness, to waiting outside an office to do a favor for a benefactor.

Here “contemplative” means growing in union with God, or being in God, or, as Ignatius put it many times: “finding God.” Ignatius found God in formal prayer and in all the rest of his day and night. In other words, he found God “in all things.”

This is a grace specific to Ignatius but not unique to him. Members of the Society of Jesus are called to ask for that same grace, and all believers are invited to ask for that grace. The more I am in engaged in the ministry of spiritual direction, the more I am convinced that this is an essential attitude, a stance, a way of being poised in relation to God and to all that is not God. The spiritual director tries to help those he or she is accompanying to grow in union with God through all of their experience, through all their activities, and all their passivities.

For Christians, this is a matter of more and more becoming identified with Jesus Christ, sharing in his relational identity. Just as Christ comes totally from Abba, the Unoriginated Origin of all, and is completely under the persuasive sway of the Holy Spirit, and loves all of creation in Abba, so the Christian is invited to grow from relationship with Christ, to living in Christ. As Saint Paul wrote in his letter to the Christians in Galatia: “I live now, no, not I, but Christ lives in me.” (2:20) Christians are called to love Abba with Christ’s love, being docile to the Holy Spirit with Christ’s docility, and engaging in the world with Christ’s own engagement, with his spirit of love and his hunger for justice.

Contemplativeness as the openness to being affected by the other on the other’s terms and contemplativeness as growing in union with God—being in God--in both formal prayer and the rest of life’s activities and passivities, are mutually reinforcing and mutually implicated ways of being.

Ignatian spirituality offers a rich resource for growing in contemplativeness in the double sense of that time. That resource is, of course discernment, understood as discernment of spirits, that is to say, discovering the spiritual origin of various movements within us, and seeking and finding God's will as God shows us that through three kinds of evidence.

The time allotted to me will allow me to only mention some of the fundamentals with regard to each of his forms of discernment. But this exercise might have its value, since Ignatian commentators don't always agree on some of the basics involved in both kinds of discerning.

II. Discerning Spirits

With regard to discernment of spirits, it is no exaggeration to say that Ignatius of Loyola was the Aristotle of discernment. Just as Aristotle codified the rules of logic centuries after people had been thinking logically (and illogically), so too Ignatius codified the rules of discerning spirits centuries after Jewish and Christians had been practicing, and writing about, discernment in a less systematic way.

As you know, the invitation to discern spirits is an invitation to move from embeddedness in our interior "stuff" to making it, to some degree, the object of our awareness, so that we might begin to learn from that interior stuff. Ignatius' name for all this interior stuff is "movements," and they are of various kinds. There are interior *acts* (I like you, I hate her). For Ignatius these don't need discernment as to their origins; I am the source of the acts. There are interior feelings (technically called interior passive affective states). These arise spontaneously with me.

Some of them are *non-spiritual feelings*; these proceed from me as I am affected by something in the outer or inner world. Ignatius is not interested in these, although they can be very significant in my day: e.g., intense joy or serious depression. Some of them are *spiritual feelings*, that is, they are experienced as encouraging us toward, or away from God, and therefore, for Ignatius, they need discerning: what spirit, good or evil, is the source within me of the feeling?

For Ignatius, we determine the source of a spiritual feeling by considering over the whole time of the feeling, the direction into which we are being pointed by the feeling and by the thoughts arising from the feeling.

As I said, Ignatius is interested only in spiritual feelings, not non-spiritual affect. The latter is significant in our lives, but it does not have the direct impact on our journey with God which spiritual feelings have.

*Some* spiritual feelings are experienced as consoling: they are sweet, peaceful, delightful, etc. *Some* are experienced as desolating: they are oppressive, dark, depressive, heavy. And some spiritual feelings are truly spiritual but are not consoling. Ignatius gives an example of this in the first rule in the first set of rules, prior to discussing spiritual consolation and spiritual desolation. He mentions that at times the good spirit stings a person's conscience with remorse. This is a disturbing feeling. It is from God and to be trusted, but it is not an instance of spiritual consolation. A careful review of all of Ignatius' writings about spiritual consolation leads to the conclusion that in every instance, spiritual consolation has two experienced ingredients, a pleasant, peaceful, or delightful feeling, and encouragement to trust God and love God more.

As you know, Ignatius makes an important distinction between spiritual consolations. There is spiritual consolation without preceding cause: no movement within me or external reality is experienced as prompting the spiritual consolation. Ignatius believes that such spiritual consolation, and all the thoughts and inclinations to action which arise while that spiritual consolation is actually occurring, are from God and are to be trusted. He distinguishes that kind of spiritual consolation from spiritual consolation with cause, which happens more frequently. Here the spiritual feeling is experienced as prompted by something going on inside me or outside of me. This kind of spiritual consolation can be caused by either the good spirit or evil spirit and thus needs to be discerned. If the feeling encourages me toward God and the things of God in the beginning, middle and conclusion of the actual feeling, it is authentic and can be trusted. If, at any point in the experience of the feeling, I notice thoughts arising within the feeling that direct me away from God and the things of God, I can take that as a sign that the feeling was caused by the evil spirit, even when the spiritual consolation seemed, early on, to be encouraging me on the path to God. (In a moment, I will say some more about this "being directed away from God and the things of God.")

Other examples of trustworthy spiritual experience that are non-consoling are the dark night of the senses and the dark night of the spirit. These are painful, distressing, experiences. They are not consoling. But they are rooted in God's action in the person, unlike spiritual desolation, which is rooted in our false selves and ultimately in the evil spirit. The dark night experiences are neither authentic spiritual consolation nor spiritual desolation.

In the first set of rules for discerning spirits, Ignatius helps us deal with spiritual desolation by giving us tactics to help us to act contrary to the direction into which spiritual desolation wants to lead us: away from God and the things of God. In the person who is beginning the journey with God, spiritual consolation is usually pretty straight forward and spiritual desolation, of course, is always to be resisted.

In the second set of rules, when an individual is making serious progress as a Christian, the evil spirit becomes more deceitful, trying to direct the individual away from God in one of three ways: (1) by directing them to apparent goods that for the person at this point in their lives would harm them or others spiritually, or (2) by seeking to lessen their peace or joy, or failing that, (3) by leading them to a course of action that contributes less to God's glory than what the person previously determined was for God's greater glory.

The evil spirit can produce spiritual consolation that seems to be pointing the person in the direction of God and God's values, but over time that spirit insinuates thoughts in the individual's affective processes so as to try to steer the person away from God and toward the person's false self, or to a course of action that serves not God, but the ego of the individual or the group.

Ignatius gives a lot of attention to spiritual consolation and spiritual desolation. In order to situate that concern for spiritual feelings in the larger context of Ignatian spirituality, I find it very helpful keep in mind a hierarchy of interior spiritual realities mapped by a superb interpreter of Ignatius, Jules Toner, S.J.

For him, uppermost in importance is faith, hope and love rooted in the Holy Spirit and poured forth in our hearts. These are not feelings. They are theological--that is, God-oriented--acts rooted in theological virtues. It is the way we are transformed into Christ, the way we are humanized and divinized by God working in us.

Of second importance in the hierarchy are clarity and truth, and courage and energy. These are helps given to our intellect (clarity and truth) and our will (courage and energy) when we cry out to God for assistance when we are in spiritual desolation. These are not feelings.

Of third importance in this hierarchy is discerned authentic spiritual consolation, whether without cause or with cause. This is to be trusted, so long as it is actually occurring within us (in contrast to the *afterglow* of the spiritual consolation). This is transitory and reliable guidance of an affective nature, given to us by the Holy Spirit.

Discerning spirits is a valuable and necessary practice in its own right. But it also becomes, at a certain point, a subset of another process of discernment: seeking to find God's will for us. Let's now turn our attention to this kind of discernment.

III. Discerning God's Will

I will review several features of Ignatius' guidelines. The literature in English on this topic is embarrassingly diverse. We need to come to a consensus about Ignatius' teaching.

I want to address four basic questions:

a. what is God's will in every situation of Christian choice making?

b. what does God provide in each of the three "times" of choice making and what does God expect of the discerner in each of the "times"?

e. can each of these "times" suffice for determining God's will or must we seek confirmation?

d. what kind of assurance do we have, at the end of the process, that we have indeed found God's will?

I will be up front with you at this point. I am drawing on Jules Toner, S.J.'s work on Ignatius' teaching regarding God's will in what follows. No one in English has more carefully considered all of Ignatius' writings and responsibly expanded on those writings when their succinctness becomes problematic. Timothy Gallagher, O.M.V. is also very helpful, although he is not as thorough as Toner. What he does offer largely follows Toner, and he is more accessible and offers more examples.

a. what is God's will in every situation of choice-making? The question bears on God's general desire. The answer comes from noticing a pattern in Ignatius's thinking, whether one is considering the Exercises, the Constitutions, or the Spiritual Diary.

The brief answer is this: God desires that in each situation of choice making, the individual or the group choose that course of action which contributes to God's greater glory. Or to put this another way, if there are two or more possible courses of action, to choose that course of action which contributes more to God's glory.

But this very familiar way of expressing God's general will needs some good theology. What does "the greater glory of God" mean, or its synonyms, "God's greater praise," "God's greater honor"?

Here Saint Anselm is very helpful. There are two meanings of God's glory: first of all, that glory which is identical with God's being, God's intrinsic glory, which being infinite, cannot increase; and, secondly, that glory that is identical with creation, God's extrinsic glory, which is always capable of increasing.

God's constant desire for creatures in their singularity in relationship to God and as a whole in their mutual relations and their relationship with God, is that they flourish more and more.

Let me make life difficult for myself right now. You might ask: how does the agile and healthy and hungry cheetah contribute to the flourishing of the sickly gazelle when it catches up to it and sinks its teeth into its flesh?

You might also ask; what does flourishing mean when Jesus is being thoroughly faithful to God-Abba's will that he love to the end in his passion while he is being falsely accused, taunted, tortured and executed on a cross? Is this flourishing? If flourishing is going on during the passion, where is it happening, however secretly?

I raise these two examples because I don't want to be facile while using the term "flourishing." But God's will is that flourishing happen, and sometimes it will be easy to determine in what that flourishing consists and at other times it will be considerably more mysterious.

But the expandable extrinsic glory of God is all about creatures in their relationship with God and in their mutual relationships flourishing more and more.

b. what does God provide in each of the three "times" of election and choice making and what does God expect of the discerner?

Here we get into some of Ignatius' wisdom that is often overlooked by commentators.

There are important similarities between the first two "times" of election or choice making, as well as differences. The third time is more unlike the first two "times."

In the first and second times of election, there arises in the person's psyche, a spontaneous impulse to a course of action and a counsel or thought that this impulse is of God.

If there is no spontaneous impulse of "being drawn" and no inner counsel or thought then the person is not in the first or second time.

I've just mention how the first and second time are similar.

This is how they differ. In the first time, there is a third ingredient which is the sense that the counsel and thought that the impulse is from God cannot be doubted at the time of the experience without the individual doing violence to themselves. There is a certainty given to the person regarding the source of the thought and the source of the spontaneous impulse.

In the second "time" of election there arises in the person a spontaneous impulse to a course of action accompanied by a counsel or thought that the impulse is from God, but there is no accompanying

certitude that the counsel and impulse are from God. Instead, there is spiritual feeling in the person that may provide the evidence that the impulse and the counsel are from God.

What Ignatius tells us about the second time of election in the *Spiritual* Exercises is woefully inadequate. We get more light when he consider that he writes about the second time in paragraph 18 of the Autograph Directory. Here he makes it clear that the impulse (the being drawn) and the counsel both arise *while the person is experiencing spiritual consolation or spiritual desolation*.

Notice that the spiritual consolation doesn't arise after the person has begun to consider a course of action; it arises within the person as that *out of which* proceed the impulse and the counsel. First there is spiritual consolation, then impulse and counsel arising out of that spiritual affect.

If the spiritual consolation is authentic and not deceptive, and if the person is given a number of these second time experiences, then the person can have reasonable confidence that the source of the authentic consolation, who is God, is also the source of the spontaneous impulse and the spontaneous counsel or thought.

In the third "time," as you will recall, there are no spontaneous impulses or counsels. Rather, the person needs, first, to be in a basic state of tranquility, not moved by various spirits. And, secondly, the individual needs to have a decent degree of interior freedom or "indifference" regarding the possible outcomes of the process. And thirdly, the person has to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit during the entire process of discernment. Finally, the individual needs to be seeking God's will with the desire to do what he or she concludes to because it is God's will.

The evidence God gives in the third "time" is quite different than the first two "times," which involved intuitive religious certitude in "time" one or authentic spiritual consolation (or its contrary, spiritual desolation) at the root of a spontaneous impulse in "time" two. Here, in the third "time," the evidence that is given takes one of two possible forms: (1) the strongest reasons arising from Spirit-guided reasoning about the cons and pros of various courses of action, reasons that indicate why one particular course of action will contribute more to God's expanding glory in creatures, or (2) what I decide to say to a friend, or what I wish I had done as I imagine myself on my death bed, or (3) what I wish I had done when I imagine myself before God's judgment seat where the wraps are taken off God's love for me which God has been pouring out on me during my whole lifetime.

c. can each of these "times" suffice for determining God's will or must we seek confirmation?

Jules Toner argues that, for Ignatius, each of these "times" can stand alone and does not always require asking God for confirmation.

But let's look briefly at each of these "times" with this question in mind.

In the first "time," there is no need for discernment during the actual discernment, because the discerner has no questions to be answered. But later on, perhaps the next day, the discerner may question what actually happened the day before and may no longer have that same certitude, and will need to seek confirmation from God. Confirmation can take the form of God giving a repetition of the first "time" experience, or of God giving a second time "experience," or, if God does not give confirmation in these forms, then the person can use Spirit-guided reasoning to come to a conclusion about God's will in the matter at hand.

The second time of election is subtle. There's no way around that. Even if God gives several repetitions of second time evidence, which one really needs if one is to accept the results of this process, the person might still be uneasy about the evidence. If the person has the time to do so, they can seek additional evidence from God, either first time, more of the second time, or the third time.

With regard to the third time, which has been given a bum rap with some Jesuits over the years, like the other two "times" it is a perfectly fine way of seeking God's will. It is not rationalistic, it is Spirit-guided, and the person is trying, with God's help, to be indifferent in the Ignatian sense of that term. But here again, if time allows and one still have real questions about the divine source of the "reasons," one may ask God for first or second time evidence, or one more may repeat the third-time process.

d. what kind of assurance do we have, at the end of the process, that we have indeed found God's will?

All the above reflections are rooted in one fundamental conviction. That conviction stems from the heart of Ignatian spirituality (and from any authentic Christian spirituality). The conviction can be expressed this way: the fundamental criterion for a Christian disciple's decision making is always God's will. Acting according to God's will assures the person that they are growing in union with God and contributing to God's project in the world. Making decisions that are rooted in deceptive spiritual consolation, or deliberately choosing to do what is for the lesser glory of God when one knows what makes for God's *greater* glory, has the potential of doing serious harm to the Church and the world. If the evil spirit cannot entice us to sin, that spirit settles for getting us to do something which is good but which contributes less to God's glory than an alternative course of action, and so, for that reason, is not God's will.

We can be sure that we are doing God's will, growing in union with God and contributing to God's project, provided we fulfill the conditions of good discernment: (1) we proceed in our discerning and choice making with the deep desire to find God's will, and finding it, to do it because it is God's will, and (2) we do our best to carry out the discernment process using the evidence God gives us; (3) we rely on God's grace to find that divine will while (4) deliberating in a spirit of significant (but not perfect) interior freedom ("indifference"). The sureness that we are doing God's will ultimately derives not from the quality of our efforts (which are finite and fallible) but from God's desire that we find and do God's will (which is our beatitude), a desire that infinitely exceeds the intensity of our desire, and a desire that is totally intent on bringing human history and the whole cosmos to beatific completion.

Contemplativeness, discerning spirits, discerning God's will: these are three major contributions to the people of God, the Church community, offered by St. Ignatius of Loyola. They are three principal ways of learning to collaborate with God in God's project in the world, which is the establishment of God's reign in history and beyond history in the eschaton. They are three main ways of growing in intimacy with the Holy Trinity as it labors in the world to bring creation to its Omega, its consummation, which is the fullness of Christ.