

Praying, Discerning Disciples

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The title I chose for this talk, *Praying, Discerning Disciples*, has grown on me. I think that trio make a solid three-legged stool for presenting and understanding the vocation of all the baptised. We are called to be praying, discerning disciples. I think we take the 'praying' bit for granted. We assume that anyone who is committed will be praying. So, in my talk I am going to take the same approach, even though prayer can never be taken for granted.

In my talk I will articulate some of the vision of Pope Francis contained in his exhortation on the spiritual life: *Gaudete et Exsultate*. I wouldn't be a Jesuit if I didn't tell the story of St Ignatius. When I was growing up in the Jesuits, I used to find it boring and deem it unimaginative that older Jesuits always needed to go back and tell the story of St Ignatius again and again. Now I feel the need to do it here. His conversion – and especially his reflection on it - is just very instructive about the way God works in the hearts and in the lives of the baptised.

Praying, Discerning Disciples

We'll start with 'Disciples'. More than anything else Pope Francis wants us to rediscover the joy of being disciples. I bring you back to the great invitation that is at the heart of his Exhortation: *Evangelii Gaudium*:

'I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since "no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord".'

The personal encounter with Jesus draws each one of us into being a member of a community of disciples. What is distinctive about a community of disciples is that it "goes forth". He has three characteristics that typify members of Christian communities, ie the characteristics of parishioners. They are people:

- **who take the first step,**
- **who are involved and supportive,**
- **who bear fruit and rejoice.**

Are you a disciple? Do you take the first step? Are you involved and supportive of the work and life of the community? Are you seeing fruit, and do you have the joy that goes along with it?

Though we are called to be Christians in community with others each one of us is utterly particular to God. He calls me to be a disciple in my own place and time and in my own particular way. There is a role in history that only you can play, a word that only you can speak. Pope Francis calls on us to have courage and play our part:

“May you come to realise what the word, the message is that God wants to speak to the world through your life. Let yourself be transformed. Let yourself be renewed by the Spirit so that this can happen lest you fail in your precious mission. The Lord will bring it to fulfilment despite your mistakes and missteps, provided that you do not abandon the path of love but remain ever open to his supernatural grace which purifies and enlightens.” (24)

So, we are disciples because Jesus calls us to go out of ourselves.

Praying, Discerning Disciples

What about the Discerning?

There are two ways of thinking about discernment:

1. It is about making good, authentic decisions, true to myself.
2. It is a question of listening for the voice of God who has called me to be a disciple.

Discernment is essentially nothing more and nothing less than making good, authentic decisions about my life. This I will do at life’s big turning points but also, in the cut and thrust of every day when I seek to respond to what life throws at me in a way that is true to who I really am and who I want to be. We need to start right there. Who am I and who do I want to be? Who do I really want to be?

A lot of the time we don’t know the true answer to that question. A first step for us can be the peeling away of the delusions and pretences that we indulge ourselves with on the surface of our lives. I read an anecdote recently in a short book by a psychotherapist who had a man come to him very concerned about his excessive drinking. The therapist heard him out and gave him a very creative and very challenging course of action that would help him break the habit. He went off to think about it, came back to the doctor and said; ‘Doctor, I’ll be honest. I don’t really want to give up the drink that much.’ You have to want it!

Implicit in the whole Ignatian system is the conviction that every human heart, created in the image of God, desires the truth, desires communion with God. St Augustine put it so much more eloquently than Ignatius could. ‘You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our souls are restless until they rest in thee.’ The problem is, Ignatius would say, that that deepest desire is hidden from our sight and kept inoperative by a whole complex of stuff, the fruits of Original Sin and the effects, as the old catechism put it, of the World, The Flesh and the Devil. One way of looking at our Christian spiritual lives is that they are an effort to peel away the layers of deformation and dysfunction in order to give free rein to the authentic God given deepest desires.

Our desires, of course are not the whole story, not even primary. The primary thing for us Christians is that God has reached out to us, come close to us in Jesus Christ and made of each one of us a whole new creation, an adopted son or daughter of God. He has called us to be disciples.

Ignatius Loyola had an overwhelming experience of being called and he learned to pay close attentions to the desires and movements of his own heart. He is considered one of the masters of discernment, so, let's look at his story

The Story of St Ignatius

Ignatius says that it felt to him that God was dealing with him the way a schoolmaster deals with a pupil, all through his conversion but especially during a nine-month period that he spent in a little town called Manresa.

Until he was nearly thirty years of age Ignatius' life was totally committed to the service of the kingdom of Spain. Everything changed radically when his leg was smashed by a cannon ball. He was a captain in the Spanish force that was defending the fort of Pamplona against the French in 1521. They were totally surrounded, and all the other soldiers were unanimous in choosing to surrender on condition of freedom to leave, since they saw that it was impossible to hold out any longer. Ignatius alone stood out and persuaded the commander that they must fight on. When the walls were breached and a cannon ball destroyed one of his legs and seriously injured the other the Spanish surrendered immediately.

He received the best care from the French doctors and was carried on a stretcher back home to Loyola. This journey would have taken days and must have been agony. However, they found after a few weeks that the bones had knit badly and the leg had to be broken again. Ignatius says about this: "During the operation, as in all he suffered before and after, he uttered no word and gave no sign of suffering save that of tightly clenching his fists."

He nearly died, but on the Eve of the Feast of Sts Peter and Paul he turned a corner and began to improve quickly. However, he now noticed that on his bad leg the bone was sticking out through the skin and one leg was shorter than the other. He could not bear this, since he intended to live a life at court and he was very vain. So, he asked the doctors whether the bone could be cut away. They replied that it could, but it would cause him more suffering than everything that had gone before, as everything was already healed. He insisted and the butchery began again; they broke the leg, sawed away the piece of bone that was sticking out – all with no anaesthetic! He showed no more reaction than the first time.

Since Ignatius' story is often used as a paradigm for the way that God deals with souls it is important that we be clear about the sort of individual we are dealing with.

He wondered why God had dealt with him in the particular way that he did and his supposition was ... 'perhaps it was because I was so stubborn'.

When he recovered but wasn't fit to get up he asked for some of the Courtly Love novels that he used to enjoy but they had none in the house and gave him a life of Christ and some lives of the saints instead. He read them because there was nothing better.

Ignatius was a dreamer. He always had ambitions of greatness. Until that time his idea of greatness had been to serve his king as a noble knight and even to give his life if necessary. There was a romantic twist as well. Every Lancelot had his Guinevere and Ignatius dreamed of winning the heart of a great lady. He dreamed that his deeds of daring do would leave one of the Princesses of Spain smitten by him and he imagined himself writing poems and verses that would make her swoon. Thinking about that thrilled him. Then, in reading the Lives of the Saints he was impressed by the fierce commitment that they showed their Master, Jesus, in their serious acts of penance and self-mastery. To his surprise he began to imagine himself doing the very same things. Given his particular nature it is not surprising that competition began to enter in; 'If St Francis could do this or St Dominic could do that, well I could do the same, or even better!'

Consolation and Desolation

Suddenly he had an insight about these daydreams; When he was daydreaming about serving his King or winning the heart of his Great Lady he got a thrill out of it at the time, but after the thrill wore off he was left feeling flat and despondent. On the other hand when he was dreaming of the great feats of penance etc he would perform in the service of Christ he found himself delighted at the time and he experienced an afterglow of contentment later. With the passage of time he distinguished these two experiences which on the surface seemed to be the same. One he called *Desolation* and the other *Consolation*. As time went on, he distinguished Consolation as any interior movement that encouraged the soul to grow in Faith, Hope and Love; and he said that it could only come from the Good Spirit. Desolation is the exact opposite; any movement that leads to a decrease in Faith Hope and Love; it comes always from the bad spirit.

These were very crude experiences of a complete novice; with the passage of time and constant introspection he became a great deal more adept at recognising subtle differences. However it's important to note that Desolation does not refer to unpleasant feelings. On the contrary they can be very attractive and indeed, apparently very noble feelings. What marks them out as desolation is that they end up with a decrease in faith, hope and love.

Within a few weeks God had given him enough light to convince him that he should follow. He amazed his family when he began talking to them about the things of God with the kind of passion that he used to reserve for worldly things. He made up his mind that he would set out on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and visit the places where Jesus had lived. He had an amazing generosity and off he went, full of lofty spiritual ambition; but it lacked, discretion, humility or charity as the following story shows:

As he rode along on his mule a Moor mounted on a horse came up with him. In the course of the conversation the stranger gave his opinion about the virginity of Mary. He accepted that she had been a virgin when she conceived Jesus but he could not believe that after the conception of her divine Son she was still a virgin.

Ignatius remonstrated with the Moor but failed to put him right. The Moor speeded up and rode ahead out of sight. Like a true 'Knight' Ignatius began to reproach himself that he had failed to defend the honour of the Mother of God. So, he decided that he would chase the Moor down and put his dagger through him. But then he began to doubt himself and he was wracked with indecision. The Moor had told him that he was going to stop off in a town some way ahead which was off the highway. Ignatius was worn out struggling with himself and this is what he decided: If the mule turned off the highway at the crossroad and went into the town he would pursue the wretch and kill him. The mule stayed on the highway and the rest is history.

Note that this was a man with a huge generous heart but incredibly immature in ways. God's grace was working in extraordinary ways and at the same time he came that close to committing murder. He says of himself that he was totally lacking in humility and discretion at this time. So, God's grace can be mightily at work in a person and at the same time that person be capable of great evil. Ignatius was already on fire with love of God AND he was still vain, egotistical, pig-headed and bigoted enough to think it possibly appropriate to murder someone because of a perceived slight to the honour of our Blessed Lady.

This very holy man had a lot of learning to do God had plans to teach him step by step and the discipline of listening to his own heart in the following months brought his understanding of discernment to new levels.

Ignatius made an unscheduled stop for nearly nine months in the relatively insignificant little town of Manresa not far from Barcelona.

He gave away all his nobleman's clothe, dressed literally in sackcloth and begged for alms every day. He lived at the local 'hospital' – which was essentially the down and out shelter. He began to fast. In former days he had been very careful of his appearance especially his hair and his nails. He had been very fashion-conscious. Now, he never combed or cut his hair or his nails. Before long he must have looked a sight.

Strange vision

It was while he was living at the hospital at Manresa that the following strange event took place. Here is how it was described: 'Very frequently on a clear moonlight night there appeared in the courtyard before him an indistinct shape which he could not see clearly enough to tell what it was. Yet it appeared so symmetrical and beautiful that his soul was filled with pleasure and joy as he gazed at it. It had something of the form of a serpent with glittering eyes, and yet they were not eyes. He felt an indescribable joy steal over him at the sight of this object. The oftener he saw it, the greater was the consolation he derived from it, and when the vision left him, his soul was filled with sorrow and sadness.'

At this time Ignatius was committing himself to ever longer hours of prayer; he was fasting; he was humbling himself by begging in the street; he was mortifying his former fastidiousness about his appearance by letting himself go to the dogs. He was subject to this

strangely attractive, delightful vision which left him with a very confusing series of emotional highs and lows.

“But during the time that the vision lasted, sometimes for days ... his soul was violently agitated. There flashed upon his mind the idea of the difficulty that the kind of life he had begun would involve and he felt as if he heard someone whispering to him, "How can you keep up for seventy years of your life these practices which you have begun?"” It was so unlike a Loyola to think of giving up!

This experience of being at the mercy of a welter of highs and lows issued into the most horrific experience of Scruples anybody could imagine. He was utterly committed to following God with all his heart. He wanted to purify himself of the effects of any sin at any time in his life. As he went to confession regularly he began to obsess over the worry that there was some sin or other that he had not confessed or at least had not confessed properly.

He tortured himself endlessly and was utterly helpless to free himself of the nagging doubts he experienced. He was so tortured that he says that at his lowest point he would have thrown himself out the upstairs window if it wasn't that he knew deep down that this would be very wrong. Modern Psychology would have a lot to say about this experience, but Ignatius was forced to put himself totally in God's hands. He prayed for light and eventually he saw through the subtle movements in his soul. He realised that while they seemed to be a call to perfection in God's service, they were in fact a terrible and destructive distraction. He realised that what was masquerading as the work of the Holy Spirit was in fact leading him away from faith, hope and love; it was the work of the Evil Spirit.

What happened was that a proud and arrogant man was humbled and finally came to a position of true peace in which he recognised that there are movements in the human heart that lead towards union with God and others that seek to undermine and confuse and spoil the friendship with God for which the human heart is made. Back in Loyola Consolation and Desolation seemed easy enough to distinguish. Now in Manresa he learnt that the deceits of the evil spirit can be very subtle. The Christian who wants to stay strong on the road of discipleship needs to be wise.

After weeks and months of a terrible purging Ignatius was granted some extraordinary mystical visions. On one occasion he says that he felt sure that it was given him to see, 'with the eyes of the soul' how it is that divine and human natures meet together in the person of Jesus. On another, as he knelt before the blessed Eucharist being raised at the Consecration of the Mass he understood, again 'with the eyes of the soul' how it is that Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist.

Like a School Master

Back to the notion of God dealing with him like a schoolmaster dealing with a pupil. God dealt with Ignatius just the way he was. Ignatius was a huge personality, full of confidence in himself, fearless, capable of being reckless. He was the only nobleman in the fort at

Pamplona who was prepared to fight to the death. That was the personality that the divine schoolmaster was dealing with in Ignatius. It is important though when we seek to learn from his experience and even follow the guidance for discernment that he gave in the Spiritual Exercises that we are not all like that. We are all not Ignatius Loyola. Some of us are fearless and reckless; others are timid and lacking in self-confidence. Some tend to ruminate long and hard about our lives before moving to decision and action; others delight in spontaneity and variety. Each single one of us is different and God deals uniquely with each one.

In the Spiritual Exercises which is the book that distilled Ignatius' experience in order to help other people experience something similar in their own prayer lives, Ignatius talk a lot about the Good Spirit and bad spirit and about Consolation and Desolation. The spirits, both the Good Spirit of God and the bad spirit, take us as they find us and work with the grain of our particular personality. Whether it is the rashness of the optimist or the caution of the pessimist all of us have patterns of behaviour that make us feel safer. All of us have our comfort zones and they can prevent us from living life to the full as Jesus wants us to. When we live our lives in Spirit and in Truth, we live in true freedom. The Good Spirit is constantly at work prompting, drawing, inviting us to this freedom. The bad spirit, on the other hand, wants to keep us stuck. CS Lewis' book, the *Screwtape Letters* is a classic description of how the bad spirit wants to sabotage any movement towards life and love; the bad spirit's ideal for human beings is boredom.

In the Spiritual Exercises there are *Rules for Discerning the Spirits*. With them Ignatius gives different insights into the ways that the bad spirit will seek to undermine people. He says we should think of the 'enemy of our human nature' who approaches us like the commander of an army who is surrounding a citadel intent on breaking down the walls. He circles round and round seeking out the weak point and that is where he makes the attack. In the case of Ignatius his weak point was his arrogant self-confidence, his cocky self-assurance that he could compete with St Dominic or St Francis and beat them in terms of penances or spiritual heroics. The way the bad spirit worked in his case was to egg him on, incite him to every greater efforts, push him to the point of collapse where he finds himself worn out and ready to throw the towel in because it all suddenly seems to be too much.

Agere Contra

Ignatius speaks of the principle of *Agere Contra*. (It translates as 'to work against'.) When an individual sees how the bad spirit typically works to undermine him or her or compromise their freedom they are encouraged deliberately to push in the opposite direction. A very practical instance of *Agere Contra* is the recommendation that a person doing their prayer period should always go a minute or two beyond the set time in order to counter the human tendency to shorten it.

A potentially arrogant powerhouse like Ignatius Loyola needed the *Agere Contra* of being hard on himself, letting himself be humbled and coming to recognise his inability to save himself, his total reliance on God. However, in the case of a timid person, lacking in self-confidence, *Agere Contra* would go in the exact opposite direction. A person who is all too ready to see weakness and inadequacy in themselves would need to practise a discipline of

encouragement of self, building up courage, trust and confidence in God's constant protection and grace.

I know a case of a Spiritual Director, who tries to mirror the work of the Good Spirit in his own practice; he had two novices doing the totally silent Long Retreat. One of them was a tough, cocky character with a tendency to be lazy and the other was diffident and too hard on himself. At the same stage of the retreat he encouraged one of them to redouble his efforts and add an extra hour of prayer in what was already a heavy day; he encouraged the other novice to take the afternoon off and slip away to the cinema. He wasn't favouring either of them, simply trying to work along with the Holy Spirit who takes each individual soul where he finds them and seeks to draw them more fully into truth and freedom in the way that is most suitable to them.

The old Heresies

There is a parallel between the way the bad spirit works in the heart of an individual and the way that heresies have emerged in the past. A heresy always starts out with something good that is rightly valued. The problem happens when it is pushed too far and becomes exaggerated. Pope Francis name-checks two of the ancient heresies as patterns of exaggerations that can arise for individuals and groups today. In that regard he speaks of modern-day Gnosticism and Neo-Pelagianism.

Gnosticism

Gnostics were people who, in a whole host of different ways prized wisdom, eventually coming to the conclusion that their own particular brand of wisdom was the only way to the fulness of life; the down-side was that all the others who didn't share in their wisdom were excluded. Francis wants us to examine our own consciences to see if we see traces of Gnosticism creeping into us. He says that modern-day Gnostics try to domesticate the mystery of God and his grace and the mystery of other people's lives. 'When someone has an answer to every question it is a sign that they are not on the right road ... God infinitely transcend us; he is full of surprises. We are not the ones to determine when and how we will encounter God ... someone who wants everything to be clear and sure presumes to control God's transcendence.'

Neo-Pelagianism

Roughly speaking Pelagians highlighted the importance of the human will rather than the intellect; they believed that we could save ourselves by our own efforts. Hear what Francis has to say about Neo-Pelagians:

"Still, some Christians insist on taking another path, that of justification by their own efforts, the worship of the human will and their own abilities. The result is a self-centred and elitist complacency bereft of true love. This finds expression in a variety of apparently unconnected ways of thinking and acting: an obsession with law, an absorption with political and social advantages, a punctilious concern for the Church's liturgy, doctrine and prestige, a vanity about the ability to manage practical matters and an excessive concern with programmes of self-help and personal fulfilment. Some Christians spend their time on

these things rather than letting themselves be led by the Spirit in the way of love, rather than being passionate about communicating the beauty and the joy of the Gospel and seeking out the lost among the immense crowd that thirst for Christ.” (57)

God has a plan for each of us, which involves us going out of ourselves, leaving our comfort zone. In context Pope Francis describes discernment as ‘... **a means of spiritual combat for helping us to follow the Lord more faithfully**’ He says ... ‘it helps us to recognise God’s timetable, lest we fail to heed the promptings of his grace and disregard his invitation to grow.’

The modern world with all its variety and immense possibilities for action and distraction calls for a discerning heart more than ever.

When the world confronts us with yet another novelty we have to discern:

‘Then we have to decide: is this new wine brought by God or an illusion created by the spirit of this world or the spirit of the devil?’

‘At other times the opposite can happen, when the forces of evil induce us not to change, to leave things as they are, to opt for a rigid resistance to change. Yet that would be to block the working of the spirit. We are free with the freedom of Christ. Still, he asks us to examine what is within us – our desire, anxieties, fears and questions – and what takes place all around us ‘the signs of the times’ – and thus to recognise the paths that lead to complete freedom.’

Francis sees discernment as the prerogative and the duty of everyone who is called to be a disciple. It is in no way elitist:

‘It requires no special abilities, nor is it only for the more intelligent or better educated. The Father readily reveals himself to the lowly.’

No Discernment without Prayer

Of course, there can be no discernment or discipleship – there can be no relationship – without prayer.

“The Lord speaks to us in a variety of ways, at work, through others and at every moment. Yet we simply cannot do without the silence of prolonged prayer, which enables us better to perceive God’s language, to interpret the real meaning of the inspirations we believe we have received, to calm our anxieties and to see the whole of our existence afresh in his own light.”

“None the less it is possible that, even in prayer itself we could refuse to let ourselves be confronted by the freedom of the Spirit who acts as he wills. We must remember that prayerful discernment must be born of a readiness to listen; to the Lord and to others, and to reality itself which always challenges us in new ways. Only if we are prepared to listen do we

have the freedom to set aside our own partial or insufficient ideas, our usual habits and ways of seeing things.”

The final act of Pope Francis' visit to Ireland last September was a short address to the bishops of Ireland. He was encouraging us to strive to be faithful to our vocation, to be preachers of the Gospel, to reach out in love to everyone and especially those on the margins. In the middle of that he looked up and departed from his script and said to the bishops: 'How many hours a day do you devote to personal prayer?' The message was clear; if you really want to be a discerning disciple of Jesus then you need to spend quality time with him in prayer.