

FIRST WEEK: RULES FOR DISCERNMENT

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Ignatius the existentialist

LONG BEFORE Kierkegaard, Ignatius discovered the importance of the category of 'subjectivity', without having the word. He differs from Kierkegaard in that his approach to 'subjectivity' is practical. He did not write at length on 'subjectivity' against an alien system. Instead he gave practical hints on how to recognize and deal with it. These practical hints are the 'Rules for the discernment of spirits'.

I am going to see what relationships there are between the meditations Ignatius puts forward for the First Week and the Rules for discernment which he give for that same week, to see what light one throws on the other. Here I am going to take into account only the so-called First Week Rules, though fully aware that the 'Rules for discernment of spirits', both First and Second Week, do in fact form one continuous organic whole. Nor am I saying that the First Week Rules are only for the First Week. One has come across thirty-day retreatants who hit desolation hard for the first time in the Fourth Week and then had to take the First Week Rules very seriously indeed.

The relationship between the First Week meditations and the First Week Rules for discernment can be seen as the relationship between the outer and inner word of God. The First Week meditations are the outer or objective word of God as contained in scripture and christian tradition, in particular as that word reveals to us our broken relationship with God, our broken relationship with our deepest selves, and our broken relationship with the whole of creation. The First Week Rules indicate how that outer objective word of God will be experienced by us as we expose ourselves to its truth, the chiaroscuro of feelings that will be ours. These rules will also indicate how to deal with such experience, how to discriminate.

The aim of the First Week is to appropriate — make personal — the christian teaching on sin, to interiorize the objective word of

God, to make one's own — to experience — the truth about sin as propounded by faith. Traditional teaching on sin now touches not only one's intellect but one's whole being. One now has an existential grasp, so that one's life and life-style are changed. The movement in the First Week is from theology to spirituality. Spirituality is how the word of God comes to this particular person in this particular culture, with this particular faith-history, and with this particular psychology. This seems confirmed by Annotation 2, to the effect that the director should give only brief points.

Let him (the director) adhere to the points, and add only a short or summary explanation. The reason for this is that when one in meditating takes the solid foundation of facts, and goes over it and reflects on it for himself, he may find something that makes them a little clearer or better understood. This may arise either from his own reasoning or from the grace of God enlightening his mind. Now this produces greater spiritual relish and fruit than if one in giving the Exercises had explained and developed the meaning at great length. For it is not much knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but the intimate understanding and relish of the truth.

It is easier and quicker to think one's way to a truth than to pray one's way.

This correspondence between the First Week meditations on sin and the First Week Rules for discernment is well brought out in the self-contradiction which sin objectively is, and the self-contradictory impulses one finds in one's own being. (Here I am assuming the Principle and Foundation as part of the First Week). According to the First Week meditations we have this human creature, 'man', made not only by God but for God, created in such a way that he can find fulfilment only in God, in acting according to God's plan, but at the same time going clean contrary to his God-given nature and purpose, and so frustrating his own deepest desires. Although Ignatius does not quote the passage, the classical expression of this human bafflement was given in Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapter 7: 'I cannot understand my own behaviour; I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and I find myself doing the very things I hate'.

'Confusion' is a key word. It is the grace we are told to ask for in the First Sin meditation. Confusion seems to mean that I cannot understand my own actions. I cannot explain or account for them. I know they are foolish and sinful but still I do them. In the meditation on hell Ignatius asks the retreatant to 'taste the bitterness of tears,

sadness and remorse of conscience'. The sinner realizes too late the self-contradiction of sin, that in choosing what seemed to him life he was in fact choosing death.

This division within the sinner gives rise to contrary impulses.¹ There is a dynamic in sin. It is going somewhere, just as there is dynamic in virtue. It too is going somewhere. They are going not just in different but in contrary directions. One is clean contrary to the other. This gives rise to the two types of Christian described in Rules 1 and 2.²

Rules 1 and 2 (314 and 315)

In the first two Rules Ignatius divides Christians into (a) those who are going 'from one mortal sin to another' and (b) those who are going on 'earnestly striving to cleanse their souls from sin and who seek to rise in the service of God our Lord. . . .' To discern which spirit is operating on the retreatant one must first know the main drift or direction of the retreatant's life as a Christian.

Ignatius is probably not thinking of some static scale with high sanctity at one end and utter depravity at the other. He has a dynamic view of the christian life. Christians are divided according to the general thrust of their christian lives. On this interpretation Rule 1 is not dealing so much with those sunk in vice as with those whose general direction as Christians is towards egotism, self-seeking, away from the service of God and others. The word 'mortal' may suggest otherwise, but there is evidence that by 'mortal' sin Ignatius sometimes means 'capital' sin or root sin within us, a tendency towards sin rather than sin itself. This tendency need not necessarily express itself in 'mortal' sins in the moral theology sense of the word. On this interpretation quite a 'holy' person would come under Rule 1, if after she had made some progress the general tendency of her christian life was now downwards, away from God, while a considerable sinner (in the moral theology sense) could come under Rule 2 if the general thrust of her christian life was upwards, towards God and neighbour.

The notion of 'capital' sin with its sense of dark depth, its far-reaching and all-embracing mystery, provides another link between the First Week meditation on sin and the First Week Rules for discernment, and shows how one throws light on the other. Ignatius wants the exercitant to come to an understanding of evil which goes way beyond any understanding of sin in the narrow moral theology sense of the word, sin in a purely personal sense. He wants us to

appreciate the cosmic dimension of sin. 'Recall to memory how on account of this sin they did penance for so long a time, and the great corruption which came upon the human race that caused so many to be lost in hell' (51). We did not initiate this process of sin. We were born into it. We are victims as well as perpetrators. In a similar manner spiritual desolation is something that overtakes us. Desolation is how this cosmic struggle appears to us when seen from within. Evil registers in the individual's inner emotional life.

The point Ignatius makes in Rules 1 and 2 is that these two types of person receive contrary motions from the good and evil spirits.

Rule 1 person. The evil spirit finds no serious opposition from the fundamental disposition of the Rule 1 person. He needs only to go along with it, and propose what accords with it. The evil spirit is content to destroy gradually and in hardly perceptible degrees.

The good spirit on the other hand comes into collision with the fundamental disposition of the Rule 1 person. He enters perceptibly 'with clamour and observable signs' (335). Even though he cannot change the fundamental disposition he can and does use the light of moral reason to show how foolish this way of life is. He arouses moral anguish. Even in a Rule 1 person there is a spiritual dimension to her affectivity.

Rule 2 person. The evil spirit seeks to make this type of person turn back, or at least hinder from further progress, and in any case to induce sadness. Deception ('fallacious reasonings') is one of his most affective weapons.

The good spirit produces effects altogether the contrary. He gives courage and strength, tears and inspiration, all with a view to assisting the progress of this person.

It should be noted that the effects of the good spirit mentioned in Rule 2 ('consolations, tears, inspirations and peace') can be absent without indicating a decline in christian life. The good spirit can also make use of desolation, by turning it into an occasion for selfless courage and resistance and so into an occasion for spiritual growth.

It should be noted further that in Rules 1 and 2 Ignatius, like a good pedagogue, has stated pure cases, unconfused by the complexities of concrete instances. Unawareness of this can lead to naïve confidence and to the ignoring of what was for Ignatius a very important principle — the help of an experienced director.

Rule 3 — Spiritual consolation (316)

When we turn to the next two rules, 3 and 4, we find an obvious

link between them and the main thesis of this article (the 'Rules for discernment' are the interiorizing of the retreatants' beliefs). In these two rules Ignatius spends much time on feelings of every kind, consolation, desolation, sadness, tears, peace, joy. He shows us what he is about. His assumption is that the Holy Spirit touches the whole person, not just the intellect. The action of the Spirit is revealed as much in feelings as in thoughts.

Consolation is primarily a feeling, but this feeling can be described or defined by relation to its cause and to its consequences. Spiritual consolation has a spiritual source or cause — love of God, a being drawn into God's love. It is a response of the whole personality to God. Such consolation also has a distinctively spiritual consequence — the rest of reality can be loved only in and for God.

We are then given some other characteristics of spiritual consolation — 'increase of faith, hope and love', 'interior joy that invites and attracts to what is heavenly and to the salvation of one's soul by filling it with peace and quiet in its creator and Lord'.

But it is Ignatius's second statement on consolation that is most relevant to the First Week of the Exercises. 'It is likewise consolation when one sheds tears that move to the love of God, whether it be because of sorrow for sins or because of the sufferings of Christ our Lord. . . .' Tears are an easily identifiable sign of consolation, but they must be tears of a certain kind, tears that are in some way related to the love of God, related in some way to his praise and service. Strange though it may seem to some at first sight Ignatius expects a fair amount of consolation in the First Week. What we discover is that sin has served only to bring out more strikingly the goodness and love of God.

A reading of the text of the First Week confirms this. One of the graces to be asked for in the Second Exercise is 'tears'. In the same Exercise the retreatant is to utter 'a cry of wonder accompanied by surging emotion' as she passes 'in review all creatures'.

How is it that they have permitted me to live . . . I will conclude with a colloquy, extolling the mercy of God our Lord, pouring out my thoughts to him, and giving thanks to him that up to this very moment he has granted me life.

In the fifth exercise we find the same. 'I will give thanks to God our Lord that he has not put an end to my life. . . .' 'I shall also thank him for this, that up to this very moment he has shown himself so loving and merciful to me'.

It is in the First Week meditations on sin that Ignatius when describing 'repetition' shows how 'we should pay attention to and dwell upon those points in which we have experienced greater consolation. . . .' The implication is that consolation is very much part of the First Week experience. It would seem that if consolation is not there at all something has gone wrong. In some mysterious way our sins become glorified, become further grounds for praise and thanksgiving, through the creative power of God in the redemption. The *felix culpa* theme is very strong.

A moment's reflection will show that this must be so. A sense of sin is a grace, a mark of God's favour. It presupposes the presence of living faith, the presence of the Holy Spirit. Only a good person (a Rule 2 person above) can have a sense of sin. Only the presence of light can reveal the darkness. It is only because Christ lives within us that we can recognize all that is not Christ, all that is opposed to Christ. To ask for a heightened awareness of sin is *ipso facto* to ask for a heightened awareness of Christ's presence within — i.e. a consolation. In fact we are never told in the Spiritual Exercises to ask for anything except consolation. We are never told to ask for desolation.

The conclusion — consolation is very much to be sought and expected in the First Week.

Rule 4 — Spiritual desolation (377)

Desolation is the contrary of consolation, and spiritual desolation is the contrary of spiritual consolation. Spiritual desolation includes such states as 'darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly, restlessness rising from many disturbances and temptations which lead to want of faith, want of hope, want of love'. It should be noted that because a particular state of consciousness hinders consolation it does not necessarily count as spiritual desolation. For example the desolation caused by excessive administrative responsibilities or severe headaches may hinder consolation, but it is not necessarily spiritual desolation. It is not of itself and by itself opposed directly to spiritual consolation.

Spiritual desolation is an anti-spiritual experience. The 'many disturbances' that make up spiritual desolation are directly opposed to the peace that flows from faith, hope and love. The essential sign by which spiritual desolation can be distinguished from non-spiritual desolation is that the desolate feelings tend directly and by their very nature to destroy faith, hope and love. These motions or desolate

feelings are anti-spiritual. Under these anti-spiritual motions the individual feels spiritually dead or dying.

The most revealing and painful element of spiritual desolation, the one that most reveals the anti-spiritual character of spiritual desolation, is finding oneself 'separated, as it were, from one's Creator and Lord'. Spiritual desolation is not, however, a non-religious experience, an experience without God at the centre. It is as much a God-centred experience as spiritual consolation. Spiritual desolation is a faith-experience, with the desolation grounded in faith. Only a person who has living faith can experience spiritual desolation.

The link with the sin meditations of the First Week is clear. Spiritual desolation, as already stated, is the self-contradictory nature of sin as registered in the feelings of a God-centred person. It is sin known no longer merely through concepts and images — theologically — but sin known existentially in the affective dimension of one's life.

This seems confirmed by the self-image which the retreatant is encouraged to have of herself, that of someone living in exile, that of someone living in the land of unlikeness, 'among brute beasts', someone 'cast out of Paradise'.

Ignatius rounds off this paragraph on desolation with another piece of existential thinking. Thought is rooted in affectivity. 'The thoughts that spring from consolation are the opposite of those that spring from desolation'. The way one thinks is determined by where one is at existentially, by one's whole life-situation.

Rules 5-8 and 10-12 (318-21 and 323-25)

These rules tell us how to act in time of desolation, how to prepare for such a time (Rule 10, 323). Here again Ignatius reveals himself as an existential thinker. What he is stressing very strongly in these rules is the need to counter-attack the desolation. We are caught up in a dynamic not of our own choosing, but we can counter-attack. We can reverse our sin history — with God's grace. Ignatius's aim is that we come to see more clearly our present life situation, the forces that have shaped and are shaping our lives. As the existentialist philosophers stress, we can begin to take charge of our own lives. Increased awareness should lead to greater freedom of action. The need for courage and strong action is well brought out in Ignatius's famous image of Satan as a shrewish woman.

Rule 9

Rule 9 is particularly important. Here we learn of God's

constructive purpose in desolation. We are given three explanations for desolation. (1) The retreatant has been negligent about her religious practices. (2) Desolation gives the individual a chance to exercise her own moral freedom. (3) Another reason for desolation is to bring the individual to a deeper and existential understanding of what it means to be a creature. Ignatius does not say that these are the only possible explanations of desolation. He hints at this in Annotation 10. The First Week Exercises are seen as 'the purgative way'. They can be seen as a time of purification, healing and new growth. They can be seen as a kind of death experience.

The death experience can and should lead to a fuller life. There are all sorts of deaths, not just biological. There are deaths of attitudes, deaths of relationships. The experience of loss and emptiness is a death experience. Each separation is a death. Death has many guises. The soul goes through many death experiences, but each time the death experience can and should make way for personal transformation. What is called the death experience or desolation is a new life trying to break through. Desolation like the death experience breaks down the old order. Without a dying to the old order there is no place for renewal.

Ignatius's teaching on desolation — the value and creative possibilities of desolation — is very acceptable and significant for an age like our own which takes the category of subjectivity so seriously. Desolation is the way to move from one level of experience to a higher level. We die to our past and present unsatisfactory patterns of life.

Hence Ignatius's somewhat startling advice about 'repetition' in the Third Exercise of the First Week. 'In doing this, we should pay attention to and dwell upon those points in which we have experienced greater consolation or desolation or greater spiritual appreciation' (62). At first sight it may seem strange to be told to return to a point of desolation. But only if one is not aware of the creative possibilities of desolation. Desolation tells us something about ourselves. It points out the unredeemed areas of our lives. It indicates the next growth-point. Hence the importance of staying with the desolation and not seeking to escape from it.

Hence too the director must be experienced. He must not try to get the retreatant out of the desolation prematurely, though he may be tempted to do this because of his own inability to cope with pain, or out of a false compassion. He must know and allow for the redemptive power of pain.

Rule 13 (326)

'Our enemy may also be compared in his manner of acting to a false lover. He seeks to remain hidden and does not want to be discovered.' It is now almost universally accepted that acknowledging and owning one's feelings is the first step to bringing about any change or improvement. Until one has owned up to and admitted one's present situation no healing can take place. This owning up, however, and admitting is far from easy, for a variety of reasons. One reason is to do with the difficulty we experience in becoming perceptively and discriminatingly aware of what is going on within us. Discernment of spirits involves more than the mere consciousness of our inner acts and feelings, it involves reflective and discriminating attention. Another reason why we find it difficult to recognize and own what goes on within us is our sinfulness. Our pride is at stake. Moral and spiritual blindness act to protect the image we have — and insist on having — of ourselves. For these and similar reasons our inner life is rarely brought to the scrutiny of a faith-enlightened intelligence. Until a person has expressed her situation in some way to another person she has not really expressed it to herself. She has not come to a full and explicit awareness. She has not owned it. Ignatius did not have such modern psychological vocabulary as 'resistance' and 'block' at his disposal, but he knew the reality. It is impressive how across four centuries Ignatius speaks to the subjectivity of our own time.

Rule 14 (327)

'In the same way, the enemy of our human nature investigates from every side all our virtues, theological, cardinal and moral. Where he finds the defences of eternal salvation weakest and most deficient, there he attacks. . . .' It would seem to follow from this that if we wish to defend the citadel of our personality we ought ourselves to investigate from every side all our virtues; to see where our weak spot is, with a view to guarding and strengthening it.

In the sixth Rule Ignatius tells us how to conduct ourselves in time of desolation. No changing of any previously formed resolution. We are to insist more on prayer. This is hardly surprising, since the primacy always lies with God. But we are also to insist 'on much examination of ourselves'. It is a curious phrase.

If we take Rules 6 and 14 together, what Ignatius seems to be saying is that a thorough self-knowledge is essential if we are to cope successfully with desolation and the attacks of the enemy. Prayer

and reliance on God by themselves are not sufficient. Ignatius did not neglect ordinary human means. A thorough self-knowledge would count as such a means. By reflecting on ourselves, on our previous successes and failures, on the circumstances in which we succeeded and the circumstances in which we failed, we can build up an accurate picture of our personality. There is a pattern to our past and present behaviour, a pattern in the way we react to people and events.

This seems to fit in with the way Ignatius instructs us to go over our sin-autobiography, in the Second Exercise of the First Week. 'This is the record of my sins. I will call to mind all the sins of my life, reviewing year by year, and period by period. Three things will help me in this: first, to consider the place where I lived; secondly, my dealings with others; thirdly, the office I have held'. It looks as though Ignatius is interested not so much in isolated individual sins as in patterns of sin. He wants to group. The structure of our personality begins to emerge.

If we take these three texts together (327, 319 and 56) we get the idea that Ignatius is laying heavy emphasis on self-knowledge, on its importance for defending ourselves against the forces of evil. If so, it fits in with what we know of Ignatius's integrated view of human beings. He sometimes lays tremendous emphasis on feelings, on the part played by affectivity in human life. At other times he lays equally strong emphasis on the part played by human intelligence. He is no despiser of reason. He believes in hard-headed thinking.

This kind of self-knowledge is an existential knowledge, acquired from hard-won experience. It varies from one individual to another. It is unique to each individual. It is not deduced from theology or book-learning. It is experiential.

Right up to the end of these First Week 'Rules for discernment' Ignatius remains faithful to his existential and experiential method.

In an age which takes subjectivity so seriously, and also the Rules for discernment which are so valuable in this matter, one can understand why a great modern theologian like Karl Rahner is drawn to these Rules as a starting point for some of his theological reflection. Theology once more grows out of spirituality.³

NOTES

¹ In the First Week meditations on sin Ignatius gives the traditional theological account of evil — sin of the angels, sin of Adam and Eve, history of sin and so on. In the First Week Rules for discernment Ignatius takes an existential view of evil. Evil is a fact. The question is not how does evil originate but how does one recognize and deal with it. These rules can be used without belief in a personal devil. What is required is a belief in a moral and spiritual struggle going on in this world, such as is described in Ephesians 6,12: 'For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places'.

² Exx 314 and 315. For convenience of language, I will assume in this article that the retreatant is female and the director male. Numbers in brackets in the text of the article refer to paragraphs in the *Spiritual Exercises*.

³ I wish to acknowledge the continuous help I have received from reading Jules Toner's comprehensive and illuminating *Commentary on the Rules for Discernment* (The Institute of Jesuit Sources, St Louis, 1982). I also wish to acknowledge the insights I have found in James Hillman's book on suicide. Throughout the article I have used Puhl's translation of the *Spiritual Exercises*.