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# Re-Interpreting the "Will Of God" in the Discernment of Spirits According to Ignatian Tradition for Young Women in Vietnam

Tran Thi Linh Chi

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**RE-INTERPRETING THE "WILL OF GOD" IN THE DISCERNMENT OF  
SPIRITS ACCORDING TO IGNATIAN TRADITION  
FOR YOUNG WOMEN IN VIETNAM**

STL THESIS

BY

TRAN THI LINH CHI, C.N.D

Submitted to

The Faculty of the Jesuit School of Theology

Of Santa Clara University

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Requirement for the degree of

Licentiate in Sacred Theology

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## **Abstract**

### **RE-INTERPRETING THE "WILL OF GOD" IN THE DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS ACCORDING TO IGNATIAN TRADITION FOR YOUNG WOMEN IN VIETNAM**

Tran Thi Linh Chi, C.N.D

Young Vietnamese women seeking to discern a religious vocation often confuse their own unconscious motivations and desires with what they perceive as the “will of God” for their lives. This study argues that a clearer understanding of the “will of God” will lead young women to a more mature decision-making process when discerning a vocation to religious life. The thesis investigates how the “will of God” has been interpreted and understood in the Christian tradition and uses these insights to develop a systematic structure aiming to assist young Vietnamese women in their life discernment.

It first examines how the will of God has been variously interpreted in the Scriptures and the lives of several distinguished spiritual figures in the Church. Second, it analyzes this concept in the life of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, whose writings and spiritual practices have been considered one of the most important tools for discernment in the Christian tradition—for detecting the language of God. Notably, the study will consider how the practice of active listening (by both director and directee) supports candidates in understanding their own inner motions and authentic desires, and through these movements, to hear the voice of God. Finally, it demonstrates how contextualizing these insights for the Vietnamese context will enlighten and empower young Vietnamese women in discerning their life vocation.

The study makes a contribution to the academic discipline of Christian Spirituality concerning the concept of the “will of God,” proposing that a clearer understanding of this concept can lead to a richer and more effective discernment process. The discussion also seeks to assist spiritual directors of religious communities who are accompanying candidates in their spiritual journeys. It is my hope that it may also prove beneficial to all those who are interested in their own discernment process or in directing others in their spiritual journey.

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Prof. Hung Trung Pham, S.J., S.T.D. (Director)

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## **DEDICATION**

To

My Departed Parents and Family Members

For their great love and prayer

I dedicate this work to

Sisters of the *Congregation of Notre Dame*

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## INTRODUCTION

When discerning between the religious life and the married life, Vietnamese people often recite the verse found in *Truyện Kiều* (The Story of Kieu), written by Nguyen Du: “Tu là cội phúc, tình là dây oan” (ascetic life leads to grace, while life based on passion leads to suffering). This common refrain reflects the deeply-held conviction that the ascetic life, focusing on abnegation, leads to happiness and peace, while the married life, which is often equated with sexual passion and conjugal love, automatically leads to suffering.

The way in which Vietnamese have elevated religious life over married life has minimized the necessity of discernment of life choices or vocation, especially among young women in the Catholic Church. If religious life in itself possesses higher value, then people do not need to discern, as religious life is an automatic choice. Any activity regarding “discernment” ultimately becomes unnecessary, or at best, a routine attempt to look for some pre-determined outcome. In addition, people have a tendency to rely on religious leaders, whom they consider to have some kind of privileged access to the voice of God, for a clear-cut, yes-or-no answer. Thus, a close study on discernment is necessary.

According to the statistics of the Vietnamese Bishops’ Conference annual report, by December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2012, there were 4,441 priests, 4,195 seminarians, 2,679 religious men, and 17,280 religious women.<sup>1</sup> At a quick glance, these statistics demonstrate the robust growth in religious vocation in the Vietnamese Church at the moment. Many of

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<sup>1</sup> Son Nguyen, “Truyen Giao Viet Nam Trong 50 Nam qua,” (Evangelization in Vietnam in the past 50 years) accessed April 19, 2016, <http://www.catholic.org.tw/vntaiwan/09news/9news246.htm>. Translation from the Vietnamese to English is mine.

these men and women become witnesses to Jesus' love by devoting their lives to serving God and God's people, particularly the poor and vulnerable. However, a closer analysis of the motivations for these religious vocations reveals a deep tension, partly due to the misinterpretation of God's will and the process of discerning it.

The Catholic Church in Vietnam, which is highly influenced by Confucian culture, tends to place higher value on the opinion or knowledge of parents or religious leaders. Therefore, the "will of God" is often presumed to be known by people in the higher rank or position or at least to be clearer to them. As a result, young people tend to obey them uncritically, and to overlook the importance of their own agency in actively seeking their life vocation. Consequently, many candidates who wish to join religious life do so at the bidding of their parents. They mistakenly equate the parents' will and wishes with those of God (or even their own). So, when the parents are no longer alive, these ordained and vowed religious men and women struggle greatly in their vocational choices while deeply immersed in the guilt and shame of the possibility of betraying their parents. Some find neither joy nor peace, but constant turmoil—both internal and communal—in their community and their ministry. Religious life becomes burdensome and meaningless.

In addition, in a country where economic hardship and social unrest continue to threaten the well-being of the many, religious life offers a safe and promising life style. As a result, many men and women are motivated to join religious orders not only to escape poverty, but also to seek a better education in the hope of a brighter future. These inordinate desires or temptations serve as serious barriers to a more sound or free discernment process. In these cases, human needs, important though they remain, function as the chief elements that determine or guide their desires. The degree of

success in the process of discernment is wrongly measured by how comfortable and enjoyable life could be.

Facing such a serious dilemma, many religious congregations have begun to re-examine the process of candidates' recruitment and selection as well as the ongoing process of their members' formation. Joining this effort, this thesis hopes to contribute to a more authentic understanding of the "will of God" so as to lead people, especially young Vietnamese women, in a better process of discernment. Like a pebble tossed in a pond creating a ripple effect, an individual decision will have an ever-widening impact on the candidate's well-being, her faith, and those around her: her immediate family, the religious community she seeks to enter, and ultimately, the Church itself.

During my years of helping students to discern their life vocation, I have often heard the plea: "Sister, please tell me whether or not God is calling me. . . If you determine that God is calling me to religious life, then I will pursue it without question. If not, I will get married." Encountering people's perception of the "will of God" in this way has caused me to question the assumption that God has a fixed or pre-determined plan for everyone. If this is the case, human efforts simply involve identifying and following that plan. Furthermore, these young women assumed somehow that I possessed the answer for their life direction. According to these perceptions and practices, God acts like someone who is playing "hide and seek" or a game of chess. Discernment then becomes a game where religious leaders automatically hold important pieces or an advantaged position. Those who wish to discern their vocation thus perceive themselves as outsiders watching someone else make the decision for their lives.

Employing socio-historical and religio-cultural analysis, this study will investigate how the “will of God” has been interpreted and understood and its relationship to the process of discernment in the Christian tradition. It will speak of discernment as learning and practicing “the language of God” within the Ignatian tradition. Insights from this investigation will be used to develop a systematic structure aiming in assisting young Vietnamese women seeking to discern their life vocation. Overall, this study argues that a clearer understanding of the “will of God” will lead young women to a more mature decision-making process when discerning a vocation to religious life.

Accordingly, the study is divided into three chapters. The first chapter will consider how the “will of God” has been interpreted and understood in Scripture and in the lives of several great spiritual guides in the history of the Church, from the Early Fathers to theologians of medieval times. Drawing on this brief survey of the rich history and tradition of the Church, the chapter presents an overview of the “will of God,” highlighting the graces and the complexity involved in the understanding of how the Creator communicates/ interacts with human beings and how human beings respond to the Creator as they seek to learn and practice the language of God.

The second chapter investigates in depth the “will of God” as understood in the writings of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, specifically focusing on the area of discernment. First, I will examine how the phrase “the will of God” is used in Ignatius’s personal experiences as recorded in the *Autobiography* and *Spiritual Diary*. Moving from Ignatius’s personal experience, I will delve into the *Spiritual Exercises*, analyzing how

this concept is understood in the Rules of Discernment [313 – 336] found in the *Exercises*. Then, based on this analysis I will offer my own reflection and summary.

The third chapter integrates the knowledge and insights from the previous two chapters into the context of religious life in Vietnam, especially concerning young women who are seeking and discerning their life direction and vocation. In the conclusion to the chapter, I will offer a concrete structure to assist and empower these women. Such a structure involves active listening on the part of both the candidate and the director to the inner movements of the young woman's spiritual life as well as the necessity of individual prayer and ongoing spiritual direction.

Re-examining the “will of God” for the lives of young Vietnamese women who are discerning a vocation to religious life has significant implications. First, the study contributes to the academic discipline of Christian Spirituality specifically by re-interpreting the “will of God” in a new cultural context, thus enriching the understanding of Christian discernment. Furthermore, a clearer understanding of the “will of God” will produce great impact on the young Vietnamese women who are seeking to discern a religious vocation. More concretely, insights which are drawn from this study will greatly assist spiritual directors of religious communities, notably those of the Congregation of Notre Dame in Vietnam, who are accompanying candidates in their spiritual journeys. Overall, the study aims to benefit all those who are interested in their own discernment process or in directing others in their spiritual journey.

**CHAPTER 1:**  
**A BRIEF SURVEY OF THE “WILL OF GOD”**  
**IN CHURCH TRADITION**

**Introduction**

“What am I to do with my life?” or “what is the purpose of my life?” These are fundamental questions that human beings continually seek to answer. Many people are depressed and suffering because they do not feel they have a purpose in life. For Christians, the ultimate purpose of life is to find and to do God’s will. In his autobiography, the *Confessions*, Saint Augustine (354-430 CE) expressed his yearning for God: “you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”<sup>1</sup> Leslie Stevenson and David L. Haberman indicate that “God created us for fellowship with Himself, so we fulfill the purpose of our life only when we love and serve our Creator.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, James Fowler notes that “human fulfillment means to recognize that we are constituted by the address and calling of God and to respond so as to become partners in God’s work in the world.”<sup>3</sup> The question then becomes how to understand the “will of God” for one’s life. This is a preoccupation of and challenge for each believer.

Throughout the long history of the relationship between God and God’s people, the “will of God” has been interpreted in different ways depending upon one’s historical,

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Chadwick. trans., *Saint Augustine Confessions* (Oxford World's Classics, 1998), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Leslie Forster Stevenson and David L. Haberman, *Ten Theories of Human Nature*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 75.

<sup>3</sup> James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith*, Rev. ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), 93.

social, and cultural location. These various circumstances have at times fostered potential misunderstandings and misinterpretations of God's will. In the Vietnamese context, for example, when people encounter situations for which they do not have explanations or in which they are helpless, they often resort to simply determining that this must be the "will of God." Others sometimes make the assumption that God has a fixed or pre-determined plan for them, and that human efforts simply involve identifying and following that plan. These ways of understanding God's will can cause a great deal of disturbance and turmoil.

Tracing the history of the Christian tradition, this chapter examines how the "will of God" has been interpreted and understood in the Scriptures, Church tradition, and prominent theologians. It presents a brief theological analysis of the concept of the "will of God" in Christian tradition, focusing on the graces and the complexity involved in the understanding of how the Creator communicates with human beings and how human beings respond to the Creator. The chapter is divided into three parts, which explore the mutual communication between God and human beings (1) in the scriptures, (2) in the Early Fathers of the Church, and (3) in the medieval period.

## **1. The God/Human Relationship in the Scriptures**

### **1.1. God created human beings in God's image and likeness**

Human beings are defined "primarily in relationship to God."<sup>4</sup> The first pages of the book of Genesis reveal to us that God created human beings in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27). According to the Priestly source (P), one of the four presumed sources of the

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<sup>4</sup> John Randall Sachs, *The Christian Vision of Humanity: Basic Christian Anthropology*, Zacchaeus studies (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 16.

Torah, the term “likeness” denotes “an internal relationship and similarity,” in which human beings are different from God but “uniquely and intimately related to God,” who is essentially relational. Moreover, God generously shares with humans God’s own creative power.<sup>5</sup> In this way, God speaks to human beings, and the communication always begins with God. The key is learning the language by which God and humans interact in the human quest for transcendence.

In this tradition, being in the image of God means possessing “intelligence and freedom of will.”<sup>6</sup> These hermeneutics play an extremely important role in the understanding of the “will of God,” and help to elucidate the relationship between God and human beings. John R. Sachs remarks that according to the Bible, human freedom is the gift of God, and it is only in freedom that a real relationship of love can happen “in which each of the lovers takes delight in the mystery of the other.”<sup>7</sup> This is a matter of a personal relationship. God chooses to be personal so that God and humans can enjoy a relationship of mutuality and intimacy. Charles H.H. Scobie concurs with this idea, stating that the image of God in the human means that “humans are capable of a close personal relationship with the God who is above all a personal God” (Gen 1:3-4), and are called to live with God and to share God’s life.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, “The OT View of God,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), v2, 610.

<sup>6</sup> McCasland, “Will of God,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), v4, 845.

<sup>7</sup> Sachs, *The Christian Vision of Humanity*, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 2003), 159.

In addition, human beings are created not only for personal relationship with God but with other humans and with non-human creation. Through them, they strengthen their relationship with God as well. Next, because the human has the “capacity of self-awareness and of self-determination he is open to the divine address and capable of responsible conduct.”<sup>9</sup> In short, humans are capable of hearing the Word of God and communicating with God. They can speak with God in prayer and obey God in service.<sup>10</sup> In this dynamic relationship, God bestows upon creatures the capacity to collaborate with the goodness of God and at the same time, actuates that ability. Thus, creatures do not merely exist, but act. They are called to actively share with one another the capacity of goodness with which God endows them.<sup>11</sup>

From the beginning, God reveals God’s will to human beings by communicating with them. When humans fell into temptation and disobedience to God’s will, and subsequently separated themselves from God, they ceased “to live in a right relationship with God and hence with each other.”<sup>12</sup> However, God was the one who sought them out to find out what had happened to them (Gen 3:9). From then on, even after the Fall, God continued revealing God’s will to human beings, not directly, but in many and varied ways. The Letter to the Hebrews, 1:1-2, states that God communicates with human beings through the prophets, the ancestors in the faith, and in particular, in these last days, through Jesus Christ, God’s beloved son, to whom the “will of God” was revealed

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<sup>9</sup> Scobie, *The Ways of Our God*, 159.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> John H. Wright, “God,” in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins OSB, and Dermot Lane, (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1987), 433.

<sup>12</sup> Scobie, *The Ways of Our God*, 159.

entirely and completely. In fact, the whole of Scripture could be summarized as the record of how God communicates to human beings, and how they have responded.

Numerous biblical passages refer to a personal relationship between God and God's people. Abraham, who became God's friend, was described as a person who could share God's plan (Gen 18, 17). Gradually, the friendship between God and Abram deepened, and God changed Abram's name to Abraham. According to William A. Barry, the sign of changing Abram's name is like someone giving a nickname to his/her friends.<sup>13</sup> The increasing intimacy between God and Abram may be seen in Genesis 18: 17; 23-32: "The Lord considered: shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?"<sup>14</sup> God then told Abraham what would happen to Sodom, and Abraham interceded for Sodom. Barry remarks that this is a wonderful passage to illustrate the development of the relationship between God and humans. Other biblical characters such as Moses and other prophets are also portrayed as having a personal relationship with God. Moses was depicted as a person to whom God "used to speak . . . face to face, as a person speaks to a friend" (Ex 33:11). The prophets were considered ones whom God loved personally. They were chosen and called by name to reveal God's plan (Am 3:7; 7:15). Particularly after the Exile, God's chosen people recognized that God established the relationship of love with them not only as a chosen people (collectively) but also in a personal way. The struggle remains as to how we as human beings listen to the voice of God and respond.

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<sup>13</sup> William A. Barry, *A Friendship like No Other: Experiencing God's Amazing Embrace* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), 19.

<sup>14</sup> All the biblical passages used in this study are cited from the "New American Bible Revised Edition," accessed April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016, [http://www.usccb.org/bible/scripture.cfm?src=\\_intros/preface-revised.htm](http://www.usccb.org/bible/scripture.cfm?src=_intros/preface-revised.htm).

The relationship between God and humanity is most fully expressed in the intimate relationship of God the Father and God's Son, Jesus, as depicted in the Gospels. If in the Old Testament, God is the father of Israel (Is 64:8; 2Sm 7:14), in the New Testament, God is first and foremost the Father of Jesus, in whom "God is very pleased" (Mk 1:11; Mt 3:7). Jesus reveals God the Father to those who trust in him: "no one knows the Father but the Son, and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Mt 11:27; Lk 10:22; Jn 6:44).<sup>15</sup>

### **1.2. God-human relationship—the call and the response**

The nature of the God-human relationship is complex. As noted above, the scriptures portray God as a highly relational God. Wright describes the interaction between God and the human through a pattern which consists of three steps. Just like any form of relationship, this is the model for how humans communicate with each other: the lover speaks and the beloved responds.

First, God always takes the "absolute initiative" in the communication with believers. In this initiative, God does not force humans but attracts them by revealing God's goodness to them. Wright calls this "the divine initiative of grace, which always goes before anything that a creature may do."<sup>16</sup> This initiative is found in the on-going process of creation and in redemption and in the way that God continually acts with humans, opening new ways of being in union with God. In God's plan, humans are invited to become co-creators with God. The first step is the precursor to the unfolding of God's plan, the invitation of God to humans to advance toward fuller participation in

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<sup>15</sup> Fretheim, "The OT View of God," 598.

<sup>16</sup> Wright, "God," 434.

God's goodness, an offering of divine power to help humans accomplish God's plan of love and wisdom. Saint Paul the Apostle designates this the "call" of God.<sup>17</sup>

The second step in the interaction between God and humans concerns the free choice of believers to respond to God's gracious initiative. Wright explains that in every free act, believers can either accept or refuse God's unfolding plan. They either allow God's love to work in it and through it or they can obstruct it. The third step is God's confirmation of the human response. In other words, God's activity can be affected by human activities. Wright notes,

this is the activity of divine judgment, where God achieves his gracious purpose to the extent and in the way that created wills are willing. This judgment is the effective expression of the consequent plan of God, that portion of the antecedent plan actually put into execution through the free acceptance of the creature.<sup>18</sup>

This pattern should not be understood literally, in a chronological sense, though the steps do have a reference to temporal sequence. In the economy of the God/human interaction, past, present, and future interpenetrate one another through the dimension of the present, wherein the free agent is responding to God's offer of love and freedom, either accepting or rejecting it. Wright comments that "The future does set before us the initiative of God's love and the past embodies the divine judgment, but at all times in the present, God is here in gracious love, inclining and illuminating the created agent, and the free creature is more or less accepting the gracious love of God (or refusing it), and God is responding in effective judgment."<sup>19</sup> In addition, God speaks to individuals through their communities and the circumstances of their lives. This dynamic has important

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<sup>17</sup> Wright, "God," 434.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

implications for the hearing of God's call in one's individual life, as the gracious offer of God's love and freedom is always concrete and particular to the context of the individual seeking God's will and purpose in his/her life.

In the Old Testament, we find numerous stories of individuals who detected God's language and responded in freedom to the plan of God, while voicing their own opinions and reservations regarding the wisdom and expediency of God's deliberations. Abram accepted God's invitation to leave his homeland of Ur to journey with his family to an unknown land and future (Gen 12). Moses was sent to Pharaoh (Ex 3), though he initially questioned God's call in his life. Joshua was summoned to lead God's people into the Promised Land (Jos 1).

Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other people were called to be God's prophets. In these cases, God responds affirmatively to their prayers on behalf of God's people (Gen 18:22-23, Ex 32:7-14; Nm 14:19-20). Terence E. Fretheim points out that the God-human relationship has a "genuinely interactive character" with regard to all people, whether or not the person chooses to follow God's plan (e.g., Pharaoh, who rejected God's plan and hardened his heart against the Israelites).<sup>20</sup>

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, we see the human and the divine locked in serious dialogue and struggle, wherein the human agent feels free to question and tussle with God. In the story of Jonah, for example, the prophet initially rejects his divine calling. Summoned by God to prophesy doom upon the Ninevites for their wickedness, he flees in the opposite direction—away from God. After he is swallowed by the fish and rescued, he obeys God's call and then immediately rails against God for sparing the lives

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<sup>20</sup> Fretheim, "The OT View of God," 610.

of the Ninevites. The interaction between Jonah and the Lord is portrayed as dynamic and heated, with Jonah acting like a petulant child, “sulking” and combative, and God remaining patient and indulgent of Jonah’s outbursts. As Jonah sulks, God shows great care for Jonah’s feelings and reveals God’s merciful intention towards all people.<sup>21</sup> The story of Jonah serves to illustrate the nature of the divine/human interaction and underscores that God’s intentions and actions are conditioned and restrained by Jonah’s free agency and response. In addition, we learn from this story that God does change God’s plan. From the outset, God threatens the Ninevites because of their wickedness. However, they believed in God through the words of Jonah and came to repent. For this reason, God changes God’s mind and ceases to punish them. Through the story of Jonah, we learn that there is a language whereby God and humans engage in dialogue and human agency is valued.

Essentially, then, through the lens of the Old Testament, God is seen as “being in a genuine relationship with every aspect of the creation and intimately involved with every creature.”<sup>22</sup> Regarding the mutual relationship between God and humans, the following ideas, articulated by Fretheim, provide a concise understanding of God’s commitments in the divine/human engagement. First, in the God-human relationship, human beings participate in the conversation with God. For instance, in the OT, Moses, on behalf of the Israelites, enters deeply into conversation with God in order to intervene for them because of their wickedness before God. In this way, humans have an important and active role to play-in the relationship with God (Exod 32: 7-14). Second, God endows

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<sup>21</sup> Cite scripture reference from USCCB and commentary <http://www.usccb.org/bible/jonah/0>

<sup>22</sup> Fretheim, “The OT View of God,” 611.

humans with the capacity to become co-creators with God—to be fertile and to multiply, and to care for all the living things on the earth (Gen 1:28). Third, the God-human relationship is substantially affected by the actions and attitudes of humans. For instance, because of the Israelites' betrayal of God, God laments and expresses grief and sadness (Gen 6:6-7, Jer 9: 17-18, Jer 9-10; 12: 7-13). Although human beings stand against God, God remains faithful in the covenant with them (e.g., Isa 30:1; Ezek 2:5; Zech 1:15). Finally, both God and humans are involved in building a future which is not mapped out. In this understanding, God does not have a fixed plan for the individual, but humans, with and through the power which is given to them, can shape their future in various ways, and “indeed the future of God.”<sup>23</sup>

Thus, the hearing of God's call, or God's will for one's life always occurs within the context of a relationship that takes seriously the agency, dignity, desires, and voice of the human person, and moreover, involves a future that is yet to be shaped. Most importantly, God's “plan” is subject to change through the dynamic interaction of the human and the divine. Through a few chosen biblical figures, we have seen that the God/human relationship progressively deepens and that the perception of God develops: from a God who is almighty and powerful, to a God who changes God's mind, expresses human emotions of grief and lament, and is deeply affected by human action. Likewise, in the history of God's dealings with God's people, the language of communication between God and humans develops and assumes different forms.

For Christians, Jesus is the way in which we are in relationship with God. In other words, Jesus is the language of God, and humans can communicate with God through

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<sup>23</sup> Fretheim, “The OT View of God,” 611.

Jesus: “in times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in the last days, he spoke to us through a son” (Heb 1: 1-2a). In the New Testament, “God is first and foremost the God and Father of Jesus, and, secondly, of those who come to God through Jesus . . . Only this Son knows the Father, who has entrusted all things to him (Matt 11:27; Luke 10:22), and, therefore, the Son, and only the Son, reveals the Father in a way that was not possible before (John 1:14-18).”<sup>24</sup> In order to grow in awareness of his own identity, and to know the will of the Father, Jesus must pray and remain united with the Father day by day in his earthly life.

The evangelists relate that Jesus chose several particular persons to be his disciples and friends. He called them by name: Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Mathew, James, Simon and Judas (Mt 10:2-4), to live with him and to share his mission (Mk 4:33; 6:7). In addition, Jesus also bestowed on them the “authority to imitate his ministry of healing and exorcism” (Lk 9:1).<sup>25</sup> The intimate relationship between Jesus and the disciples deepened over time as they shared their daily lives, the successes and failures of their mission, the grief of his death, and ultimately the joy of the resurrection.

Moreover, the God-human relationship does not end with Jesus’ death and resurrection. With the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his ascension to the Father, the relationship unfolds in a new way, in which the Holy Spirit plays a crucial role. Upon his impending passion, Jesus comforts his disciples by declaring, “The Advocate, the Holy

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<sup>24</sup>Neil G. Richardson, “The New Testament View of God,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of The Bible*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 598.

<sup>25</sup>Paul D. Holland, “Vocation,” *The New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins OSB, and Dermot Lane, (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1987), 1088.

Spirit that the Father will send in my name—he will teach you everything and remind you of all that [I] told you” (John 14: 26). And “when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth” (John 16:13). The role of the Spirit is “to animate, teach, enliven, provoke, empower, and nourish believers.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, through the Spirit, the will of God now becomes “internalized in the followers of Christ,” and under the impact of the Spirit, believers will examine the “various capacities of the psyche” such as “intuition, imagination, memory, and will.” Regarding discernment, the role of the Spirit can be defined as “counselor, guide or presence of Christ who intends to reveal the will of God to people” in their own context.<sup>27</sup>

This understanding leads us to conclude that God is the author of our desire for God, providing the tools and supporting us in our quest to fulfill our lives according to God’s will. Our responsibilities include asking God “for the gift of discernment and, as it is given, learning to live discerningly until we develop habitually listening hearts and lives responsive to God’s call to us as individuals and communities.”<sup>28</sup>

In short, in the God-human relationship, God always takes the initiative toward humans, and humans respond in freedom to God’s will; in turn, God affirms humans’ free choice. This segment has sought to illuminate an understanding of the “will of God” in terms of the God-human relationship in the Scriptures.

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<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Liebert, *The Soul of Discernment: A Spiritual Practice for Communities and Institutions* (Louisville Kentucky: Westminster John Know Press, 2015), 19.

<sup>27</sup> Ben Campbell Johnson, *Discerning God’s Will* (Pittsburgh, PA: Vital Faith Resources, 2001), 50.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

## 2. The “Will of God” in the Early Fathers of Church

God created humans in God’s likeness and image so that they may be joined to God and enter into relationship with God. For this reason, humans can only know true happiness as they fulfill their lives according to God’s will. The Early Church Fathers interpreted this crucial insight according to their respective contexts, and each of their perspectives has deeply impacted the spiritual life of the Church. In this segment, I will undertake a brief survey of the understanding of “will of God” in terms of God’s communication and humans’ response by examining several Fathers, namely Origen of Alexandria (185 – 254 CE), Gregory of Nyssa (335 – 395 CE), Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 CE), and Gregory the Great (540 – 604 CE), because of their impact on the life of the Church to the present day. The four figures represent the four main periods in the early Church and thus the process of developing the way to detect the language of God throughout the historical tradition of Christian spirituality.

### 2.1. Origen of Alexandria (c. 185 – c. 253)

Origen emphasizes the spiritual journey of the individual in union with God through the study of the Scriptures. He employs not only an intellectual approach to the Scriptures, but one that is rooted in the experience of prayer and the encounter with God, emphasizing the significance of intimacy with Christ in the interpretation of the Scriptures. According to him, humans are able to perceive God and move toward union with God because they “possess a set of spiritual senses.”<sup>29</sup> For Origen, the best way to become familiar with God is through love, as “there is no authentic *Scientia Christi*

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<sup>29</sup> Arthur Holder, ed., *Christian Spirituality: The Classics*, (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), 4.

(knowledge of Christ) without falling in love with him.”<sup>30</sup> For Origen, love is the highest degree of the knowledge of God. Prayer, in this view, is “a genuine dialogue of love, to the point of rendering the person wholly possessed by the divine Beloved, vibrating at the Spirit’s touch, resting filially within the Father’s heart.”<sup>31</sup> In this, Origen likens the relationship between God and humans, who become “two in one spirit,” to the love between a man and a woman, who become “two in one flesh.”<sup>32</sup>

According to Origen, the will of God is revealed in the divine Scriptures. In his *Letter to Gregory*, he highly recommends the *lectio*, and asks him to patiently practice reading the scriptures, trusting that such a careful reading will please God and reveal God’s will. The Holy Spirit will illuminate whatever is unclear, he urges.<sup>33</sup>

## **2.2. Gregory of Nyssa (c.335 - c.395)**

Both Origen of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa address the ongoing spiritual process of the individual. However, while Origen emphasizes the exegesis of the Scriptures and the process of the knowledge of God through prayer and *lectio divina*, Gregory focuses on the present, individual experience of the encounter with God.

Gregory of Nyssa lived in Cappadocia in the fourth century, a time in which the social structure was very hierarchical and the circumstances of a person’s birth were extremely important, determining what one could achieve in life. This society was marked by a stark distinction between rich and poor, free persons and slaves, male and

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<sup>30</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *The Fathers of the Church: Catecheses: St. Clement of Rome to St. Augustine of Hippo*, Edited by Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J. (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), 345, Kindle.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 360.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

female. In this regard, Gregory challenged the people of the society by reminding them that everyone is created in the image of God, with the goal of becoming “like God and sharing the divine life.”<sup>34</sup> According to Pope Benedict XVI, creation was one of Gregory’s primary topics; he “saw in the creature the reflection of the Creator and found here the way that leads to God,”<sup>35</sup> now, at the present moment. According to Gregory, humans are invited to ever-greater participation in God, the source of all goodness. They are called to share God’s infinite potential “by doing God’s will, being friends of God, and giving God all the glory.”<sup>36</sup>

Gregory is not only considered a theologian who made a great contribution to the tradition in terms of Trinitarian theology, but was also a well-known spiritual theologian. Through his seminal work *The Life of Moses*, he elaborates the journey of contemplation in terms of “stages and ascent,” in which the human moves toward darkness rather than light. He illustrates this movement by depicting Moses as entering “into ever deeper clouds of darkness in his encounter with God.”<sup>37</sup> Gregory addresses the important role of human collaboration in this journey, a journey in which humanity dialogues with God. In prayer, with purity of heart, humans can find the light of God within themselves. In this way, God can reveal God’s will to humans, and with God’s grace, humans can respond. In the spiritual journey towards God, Jesus Christ is the perfect Teacher and Model. Gregory holds that the one who believes in Christ must always “examine his own

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<sup>34</sup> Holder, ed., *Christian Spirituality: The Classics*, (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), 26.

<sup>35</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *The Fathers of the Church: Catechesis: St. Clement of Rome to St. Augustine of Hippo* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), 789, Kindle.

<sup>36</sup> Holder, *Christian Spirituality*, 34.

<sup>37</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Brief History*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 37.

thoughts, his own words and his own actions in his innermost depths to see whether they are oriented to Christ or are drifting away from him.”<sup>38</sup>

### **2.3. Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430)**

Saint Augustine of Hippo was one of the greatest Fathers of the Latin Church. He has had a profound impact on the cultural life of the West and on the Christian spiritual and intellectual tradition.<sup>39</sup> According to Augustine, God created humans in the image of God within their heart.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, he urgently invites us to reconnect with ourselves, to pay attention to our interiority. In his *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, he urges, “Return to thy heart; see there what, it may be, thou canst perceive of God, for in it is the image of God. In the inner man [sic] dwelleth Christ, in the inner man art thou renewed after the image of God.”<sup>41</sup> Moreover, it is not a privatized spirituality to which one is invited; rather, the heart is the place in which humans are united with the whole human family in God.<sup>42</sup>

One of his best-known works is the *Confessions*. In this work, Augustine emphasizes the interior movements and the psychological dimensions of the human person. For Augustine, God’s presence in the human is mysterious; however, he recognizes the presence of God deep within himself. Therefore, in his work *On True Religion*, he advises us: “do not go outside,” but “return to within yourself; truth dwells

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<sup>38</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On Christian Perfection*, 46, col. 284 C, Cited in *The Fathers of the Church*, 838, Kindle.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 1513.

<sup>40</sup> Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 38.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

in the inner man; and if you find that your nature is changeable, transcend yourself.”<sup>43</sup> He stresses the mystery of the “I,” the mystery of God “who is concealed in the ‘I.’”

According to Pope Benedict, this “is something quite extraordinary, without precedent, and remains forever, as it were, a spiritual ‘peak.’”<sup>44</sup>

In short, Augustine finds the locus of union with God in the heart, in which God’s divine image is reflected. On the one hand, Augustine understands human weakness and guilt; on the other hand, he insists that humans must continually undergo conversion. Such conversion, explains Benedict, is something “definitive, decisive, but the fundamental decision must develop, be brought about throughout our life.”<sup>45</sup> Like Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine highlights the crucial role of prayer in the spiritual life. It is in prayer that humans discern God’s will in their life and recognize the grace of God. Thus, he urges believers to develop a deep intimacy with Jesus. As Jesus was united with the Father in prayer, Augustine urges believers to develop a close relationship with Jesus in order to be united the Trinity. Similar to Origen, Augustine dedicated himself intensely to the study of Scripture since it is through meditation on the Scriptures that humans deepen their encounter with God.

#### **2.4. Gregory the Great (c. 540 – 604)**

Saint Gregory the Great is one of the greatest of the Church Fathers and one of the four Doctors of the Western Church. He was the Bishop of Rome from 590 to 604 and a distinguished figure because of his holy life and his great contributions to the Church as a

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<sup>43</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *The Fathers of the Church*, 1644. Kindle.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 1519–2193, Kindle.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 1626, Kindle.

true peacemaker and a restless proclaimer of the authentic faith. Pope Benedict comments that Gregory the Great was a man “immersed in God.”<sup>46</sup>

Gregory too highlights the importance of studying the Sacred Scriptures. He approached the scriptures not only speculatively, but as a source of nourishment for the soul. Immersed in prayer through contemplation, believers deepen their relationship with God with the help of the sacred texts of Scripture. At the same time, according to Gregory, believers can only hear God’s voice and perceive the will of God with a humble interior attitude.<sup>47</sup> Crucially, he emphasizes that this interior attitude must lead to action. In other words, contemplation and action always walk side by side and are “not two separate lifestyles, or two stages in a person’s personal history.”<sup>48</sup> Christians must continually move back and forth between these two poles as both are crucial to the Christian life. Gregory thus stresses that understanding of sacred scripture makes no sense if it does not lead to action. Therefore, he proposes that carrying out the moral injunctions of sacred scripture involves the dual imperatives of “to know-to do, to speak-to live, to know-to act.”<sup>49</sup>

In addition, Gregory focuses on the lifelong process of inner transformation, which demands that Christians grow in faith, hope, and love. Therefore, he emphasizes the inner realms of the human soul in all its aspects, including the hidden motives and the significance of internal conflict. Arthur Holder comments that Gregory “takes human

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<sup>46</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *The Fathers, Vol. II* (Huntington, Ind: Our Sunday Visitor, 2010), 42.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>48</sup> Holder, *Christian Spirituality*, 82.

<sup>49</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *The Fathers, Vol. II*, 44.

experience very seriously as the arena of divine action” in terms of discipline and training. The spiritual journey of the Christian towards God is therefore “an ongoing experiment with grace.”<sup>50</sup>

In summary, what we have learned so far from the four Fathers of the Church is that the will of God is revealed to humans in various and dynamic ways and that the process of detecting the language of God is on-going. In order to perceive the will of God or to learn God’s language, the Fathers stress the important role of Scripture and of the personal relationship with God. In this way, those who desire to deepen their relationship with God must become familiar with God by studying, understanding and contemplating the sacred scriptures. Origen of Alexandria, for example, focuses on the importance of interpreting the Scriptures through the lens of intimacy with Christ. Gregory of Nyssa goes deeply into the present moment, highlighting the personal experience of the encounter with God through the practice of *lectio divina*. Language becomes a spontaneous act, a speaking from the heart in response to God. Continuing this process, Augustine finds the locus of union with God not only in the mind, but in the heart, where God’s image is reflected. In this regard, a humble interior attitude—the ability to open the heart to receive God’s love, is crucial. In brief, it is only in the context of personal relationship that we can detect God’s language and know God’s will for our lives. In the following segment, I continue to investigate how medieval theologians interpreted and understood the “will of God” in the life of the believer.

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<sup>50</sup> Holder, *Christian Spirituality*, 84.

### **3. The “Will of God” in medieval times**

God’s communication continues in the world and in the human soul. The history of the Church demonstrates that men and women living in every time and circumstance seek to discover and fulfill God’s will according to their own lights. Innumerable men and women have spent their lives successfully living in tune with God’s plan and have influenced the faith lives of later generations. In this third and final segment, I examine several figures of the Medieval Church with regard to understanding God’s will and the modes of communication with God, including Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 – 1153), Dominic Guzman (1170 – 1221), Francis of Assisi (1182 – 1226), Julian of Norwich (1342 – 1416), and Catherine of Siena (1347 – 1380), because of their great contribution to the spiritual life, to theological innovation, and to the religious orders in the Roman Catholic Church. Their devotional lives enlighten us to recognize God’s work in the life of Christians, and the way in which human beings may open their hearts to receive God’s will.

#### **3.1. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 – 1153)**

Saint Bernard was born in 1090 in France. He was well trained in Latin and rhetoric, which grounded his later monastic life. He is characterized as the last of the Fathers of the Church because of his contribution to Patristic theology in terms of renewing and bringing “to the fore the important theology of the Fathers.”<sup>51</sup> According to Mark S. Burrows, Bernard sets his theological vision in the language of desire for God and the longing to bind intellect and affect, body and soul, on the long journey of love

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<sup>51</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *The Fathers*, Vol. II, 158.

which carries “one into God’s very being.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, he focuses on the law of charity which is written in our hearts, the law of love.<sup>53</sup>

Regarding the God-human relationship, Bernard emphasizes the profoundly personal experience of Jesus Christ. This is the true knowledge of God, the true faith of the Christian. For Bernard, the Christian faith is “first and foremost a personal, intimate encounter with Jesus [;] it is having an experience of his closeness, his friendship and his love.”<sup>54</sup> In this way, we can learn to know Jesus better and to deeply engage with Him.

According to Bernard, love is key to an authentic relationship with God. Love is the language of God. For him, love is “an instrument of deification, a means of returning from the ‘realm of unlikeness’ to God to a region of ‘likeness.’”<sup>55</sup> Thus, the experience of authentic love—to love and be loved—has the power to transform those who are involved in it. Bernard states that in order to cultivate the relationship of love and to know union with God, Christians must manifest God’s love. Therefore, he highlights the important role of prayer and contemplation in order to nurture Christian faith and have an intimate friendship with God through Jesus.<sup>56</sup> In the faith which is rooted in intimacy with Jesus, Christians can know the path they should take and how to adjust their lives to be in tune with God’s will.

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<sup>52</sup> Holder, *Christian Spirituality*, 87.

<sup>53</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, “On Loving God,” accessed November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017, <http://www.leaderu.com/cyber/books/onloving/onlov12.html>

<sup>54</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *The Fathers, Vol. II*, 161.

<sup>55</sup> G. R. Evans, *Bernard of Clairvaux*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 52.

<sup>56</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *The Fathers, Vol. II*, 162.

Bernard sees the Bible and the teachings of the Fathers of the Church as important sources of spiritual life. He believes that Scripture “is the Word of salvation” and thus the most valuable and important text upon which to contemplate.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, he identifies both Christ and the Bible as God’s Word. Because the precepts of scripture are salvific, scripture is a “witness,” testifying to the will of God.<sup>58</sup> Thus, for Bernard, the Christian knows God’s will through deep intimacy with God through Christ in prayer and by deeply imbibing the salvific words of Scripture.

### **3.2. Francis of Assisi (1182 – 1226)**

The holy life of Bernard, and in particular his tender devotion to Christ, influenced later generations, among of them Francis of Assisi and his followers. Francis was born at Assisi in 1182 to a noble family. Similar to Bernard, Francis sought a life utterly unified in God’s love and the love of the Son, which required “the singleness of mind and the inflammability of the loving heart that the way of poverty most truly connoted for him.”<sup>59</sup> Therefore, the love of Christ compelled him to imitate the poor Christ. This disposition is grounded in the mystery of the Incarnation, in which Jesus Christ emptied himself utterly, “taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness and found human in appearance . . . becoming obedient to death.”<sup>60</sup> Francis publicly gave away his possessions, lived in radical poverty, and totally depended on God in order to follow Jesus and imitate him.

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<sup>57</sup> Evans, *Bernard of Clairvaux*, 57.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Ray C. Petry, ed., *Late Medieval Mysticism* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 116.

<sup>60</sup> USCCB, PI 2:7

Francis's life reflected the journey of seeking God's will to bring his life into harmony with God's plan through prayer, penance, simplicity, radical poverty, serving the poor and marginalized, and engaging in charitable works.<sup>61</sup> For example, in the context of contemplative prayer, Francis heard Jesus' voice calling him to rebuild the old chapel of *San Damiano*, a call that was at once literal and metaphorical, entailing the renewal of "the Catholic Church as a whole."<sup>62</sup>

In the context of service to the poor, he embraced and kissed a leper he met on the road, giving him a coat and money. Following the encounter, Francis saw that "the leper had transfigured into an apparition of Christ."<sup>63</sup> Francis' action, as Sheldrake points out, was not only a response to suffering, but represented "an encounter with the excluded 'other'." According to the medieval perspective, lepers, besides having a dreadful disease, embodied all the darkness, fear, evil, sinfulness, and impurity of the society and were thus excluded from the "community of the spiritually pure."<sup>64</sup> In this experience, Francis came to the profound insight that in order to be united with God, to do God's will, he had to imitate Christ's life by living in humility and poverty, serving the poorest of the poor. In other words, loving and caring for the poor, and living simply, are the ways in which Francis practiced the language of God. Moreover, in his famous Cantic of Creation, Francis envisages the elements of nature as "brothers" and "sisters." Thus, in perceiving the interconnectedness of the whole creation, Francis recognized God's will

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<sup>61</sup> Peter Feldmeier, *Christian Spirituality: Lived Expressions in the Life of the Church* (Winona, Minnesota: Anselm Academic, 2015), 141.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Feldmeier, *Christian Spirituality*, 145.

<sup>64</sup> Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 92.

for all creatures to be treated with love and respect because they reflect to us “the face of Christ.”<sup>65</sup>

### **3.3. Dominic Guzman (1170 – 1221)**

Saint Dominic was born at Caleruega, Spain, in around 1170. He is considered one of the figures who made an essential contribution to the renewal of the Church of his time, and founded the Order of Preachers known as Dominican Friars. Saint Dominic recognized the problem of poorly-educated priests and the tendency of the Church toward worldliness. He responded to these challenges by living simply, serving the poor, preaching the Gospel, and dedicating himself to studying the Bible in order to know and love God deeply. In this way, he detected the language of God and answered God’s call for his life. He was convinced that priests needed to be well trained before preaching. Therefore, he recruited members from universities and created space and opportunity for them to continue their studies. Imitating the mission of Jesus, he sent forth his friars in pairs to preach from village to village without carrying money, thereby to live a life of “evangelical poverty.”<sup>66</sup>

Similar to Augustine, Bernard, and other figures, Dominic burned with apostolic zeal and love for God. For Dominic, love is central to the relationship with other people and with God. Pope Benedict comments that Dominic always “spoke with God and of God.”<sup>67</sup> Throughout his life, Dominic always aimed for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

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<sup>65</sup> Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 92.

<sup>66</sup> Feldmeier, *Christian Spirituality*, 138–9.

<sup>67</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience, 3 February 2010. Accessed May 20, 2017, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20100203.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20100203.html)

I have investigated the God-human relationship through the lives of several male spiritual exemplars. However, it is extremely important to examine how women mystics have understood and interpreted the God/human relationship. This is so because their particular contributions to the tradition, notably their integrative and embodied approaches to the life of faith and mystical practice, their leadership roles, and their prophetic denunciations of clerical privilege and power have often been underrepresented in the history of the Church. In what follows, I will consider Julian of Norwich (1342 – 1416) and Catherine of Siena (1347 – 1380), two exemplary spiritual guides of the late medieval period.

### **3.4. Julian of Norwich (1342 – 1416)**

Julian of Norwich has deeply influenced the Christian mystical tradition through her testimony and teaching. She was a kindly and devout woman. She received sixteen revelations of God’s love, which she wrote down and commented on in her book *Revelation of Divine Love*. Through these revelations, Julian experienced a profound intimacy with God, causing her to feel loved and “whole within herself,” which is the fundamental feature of the relationship between God and humans.<sup>68</sup> The theme of divine love pervades Julian’s visions. She believed that spiritual and social realities are not opposed to one another but united in love because the love of God “creates in us such a unity that when it is truly seen, no man [sic] can separate himself from another.”<sup>69</sup> Similarly, both contemplative prayer and the study of theology are necessary to “an

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<sup>68</sup> Holder, *Christian Spirituality*, 148.

<sup>69</sup> Feldmeier, *Christian Spirituality*, 148.

experience of God in this life that is existentially real, even somatically felt.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, humans are united with God as whole persons in an integration of the psychological, physical, and spiritual dimensions.

Julian emphasizes the crucial role of prayer as a means to dialogue with God and to develop a personal intimate relationship with God. In the fourteenth revelation, Julian indicated that “prayer unites the soul to God.”<sup>71</sup> For her, the “highest form of prayer” entails learning “wisely to adhere to the goodness of God.” This is so because “God’s goodness meets human beings in places where they least likely would be looking for it.”<sup>72</sup> It is through contemplative prayer that humans learn to “adhere to God, to be united to him.” At the same time, God guides the soul as to “how it should bear itself” when contemplating God.<sup>73</sup> In short, for Julian of Norwich, the essential element in the God-human relationship is the personal, embodied experience of God’s love in the concrete, mundane events of daily life. Contemplative prayer is the key to open this divine relationship.

### **3.5. Catherine of Siena (1347 – 80)**

Catherine of Siena was one of the female theologians declared “Doctor of the Church.” She lived in the tumultuous context of the Hundred Years War between England and France. At the same time, the Italian city-states were at war among themselves and with the papacy. The Church was considered to be in a period of internal

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<sup>70</sup> Holder, *Christian Spirituality*, 149.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

decline. A great number of Christians had abandoned the faith, and the clergy were severely compromised by wealth, self-indulgence, and unfaithfulness.<sup>74</sup> In this context of upheaval, uncertainty, and the seeming absence of God in the Church, God called Catherine of Siena to serve as a witness to the world that God is actively working in humans' lives, and is present in the Church forever. While many believers abandoned the faith in God and the Church, Catherine adhered to God. She was “feisty and passionate, stubborn and willful, completely devoted to the love of God.”<sup>75</sup> Thus, while the clergy was degraded by wealth and fallen into decadence, Catherine practiced an extremely ascetic life. As she recounted to Raymond of Capua, her friend and biographer, at the age of six, she had a life-transforming religious experience in which she had a “vision of Christ on a throne above the Church of San Domenico,” and thereafter entirely devoted her life to God by making vow of virginity.<sup>76</sup>

Like the other figures referenced above, Catherine maintained intimacy with God through contemplative prayer. In meditation, she recognized that the will of God in her life was to preach peace and conversion and to witness to a life of modest living as a counter-sign to the decadence of the male clergy. In prayer, she received God's inseparable commandments: “love of God and love of neighbor.”<sup>77</sup> Through intimate union with God in prayer, Catherine became a distinguished preacher and peacemaker by utilizing her considerable gifts of reconciliation.

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<sup>74</sup> Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Speaking with Authority: Catherine of Siena and the Voices of Women Today*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 9–10.

<sup>75</sup> Holder, *Christian Spirituality*, 172.

<sup>76</sup> Hilkert, *Speaking with Authority*, 10–11.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

She dictated her mystical theology in terms of a “dialogue between God and herself,” namely *The Dialogue of Divine Providence* or “the book,”<sup>78</sup> which reflects a profound personal experience of God. The self-imposed nature of quasi-monastic life allowed her to cultivate “in private an intense and rich spiritual awareness”<sup>79</sup> which has benefitted greatly the spiritual life of the Church.

This brief encounter with these spiritual exemplars of our tradition demonstrates that God always blesses God’s people and communicates with them in various ways depending on their own particular social, historical, and cultural contexts in order for them to recognize and carry out God’s will. Under all circumstances, however, God’s will is known in the mutual relationship between God and humans, in which humans collaborate with God. Through prayer and study of the sacred scriptures, humans deepen their personal experience of Jesus and imitate his life, living out their faith in humility and poverty, embracing a life of simplicity, preaching the Gospels, and serving the poor. These figures speak the language of God not only through words but through acts.

### **Conclusion**

This brief survey of the Scriptures and the concrete lives of several great spiritual guides in the history of the Church, from the Early Fathers to theologians of medieval times, portrays a God who continues to work actively in the world, and does not cease to reveal God’s love, mercy, kindness, and will to save God’s creation. God’s will is understood as God’s plan, a plan which is not fixed or static, and is therefore subject to change. In this understanding, humans have an important and active role to play. They

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<sup>78</sup> Hilkert, 13.

<sup>79</sup> Holder, *Christian Spirituality*, 174.

are called to cooperate with God's grace to accomplish the plan and fulfill it in their lives and communities in keeping with their own circumstances. Regarding this point, on the one hand, God always takes the initiative in communication with humans, patiently and personally inviting them to open their hearts and their minds to receive God's grace. On the other hand, humans have to cooperate with God's grace, allowing God to work in their lives, and together with God, to continually create a world of love, peace, reconciliation, and authentic relationship.

In union with God in contemplative prayer and action, women and men in every age have had personal experience of God's love and have sought to order their lives according to God's will—to tune their lives with God's life. God's language is disclosed through these men and women. Through these figures, we learn that God's language is extremely rich and profound (multi-faceted and mysterious), and above all, context-specific.

This chapter has laid the foundation for the following chapter, in which we consider how the “will of God” was understood and interpreted by Ignatius of Loyola, who himself drew upon the wisdom of sacred scripture and the spiritual legacy of these seminal figures.

**CHAPTER 2:**  
**THE WILL OF GOD IN THE DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS**  
**ACCORDING TO IGNATIAN TRADITION**

**Introduction**

Jesus taught his disciples to pray to the Father in these words: “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” This prayer reflects the ultimate intention for his life and for the life of his followers. During his time on earth, Jesus always sought to fulfill God’s will in his life: “I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me.”<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, he identifies the accomplishment of the will of God with his daily nourishment: “My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work.”<sup>2</sup> The passion of Jesus represents the pinnacle of his obedience to God’s will to reveal God’s love and mercy to the world. Thus, as followers of Christ, doing God’s will is also our vocation.<sup>3</sup> Here it is crucial to note that “God’s will” looks different for each person, and identifying it calls for careful discernment of how God is leading the individual or community in a given situation.<sup>4</sup>

In the God-human relationship, God always blesses humans with God’s grace, inviting them to open their hearts so that in concert with human agency, God can work in their lives through the people they encounter and the events which occur daily in human life. Understanding the will of God for one’s life demands that believers become familiar

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<sup>1</sup> Jo, 6:38

<sup>2</sup> Jo, 4: 34

<sup>3</sup> Jules J. Toner, *Discerning God’s Will: Ignatius of Loyola’s Teaching on Christian Decision Making* (Saint Louis: Inst. of Jesuit Sources, 1991), 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

with God's language, the language of love, and cultivate a deep relationship with God. This involves understanding how God communicates with human beings. By the grace of God, believers can communicate with God through various forms of prayer such as contemplation and meditation, as well as through their communities, their studies, and the circumstances of their lives. Through these means, they can hear God's voice and respond to God's call in their lives.

In the previous chapter, this dynamic has been examined in the tradition of several prophets in the Scriptures, of the Early Church Fathers, and medieval spiritual figures in the history of Church. Within their own social, historical, and cultural contexts, they learned to detect God's language, and as a result, with God's grace, they lived out the will of God in their lives. Their experiences and knowledge have indeed nourished the Church and inspired men and women throughout the ages. Among these figures, Ignatius of Loyola, through his experience, is known to be a leading figure in developing a systematic structure of the language of God.

The present chapter examines in depth the "will of God" in the foundational writings of Ignatius, namely the *Autobiography*, the *Spiritual Diary*, and the *Spiritual Exercises*, focusing on the area of discernment. The chapter closely investigates Ignatius's experiences of God in his personal writings, and includes three main parts. The first part examines how the term the "will of God" is used in Ignatius's life as recorded in the *Autobiography* and *Spiritual Diary*. The second part analyzes how this concept is understood in the Rules of Discernment found in the *Spiritual Exercises*. Based on this analysis, the third part consists of my own reflection and summary.

## 1. The “Will of God” in Ignatius’s *Autobiography* and *Spiritual Diary*

Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) was born and grew up in a noble family in the Basque country of northern Spain, in the castle of Loyola. He was trained to be a knight (*caballero*), and served the Duke of Nájera.<sup>5</sup> A severe injury in the battle of Pamplona, where a cannonball struck his legs, led him to a radical conversion. While the incident disrupted his career, it opened new possibilities for him—to become a knight in the service of Christ. Ignatius is a great spiritual master of the Christian tradition and the founder of “The Society of Jesus,” one of the largest and most influential religious orders in the world today.

Through many painful struggles and challenges, Ignatius developed an intimate relationship with God, spending all his adult life after his initial conversion at Loyola doing everything for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. His life became a process of learning the language of God. His experiences in terms of his relationship with God were narrated in his personal writings as well as in the *Spiritual Exercises*. We hark back to these documents to discover how Ignatius learned the language of God, so that we too may learn similar patterns of speech in order to follow them. In order to understand more deeply how Ignatius perceived and discerned the “will of God” and encountered God in his daily life, I turn first to the *Autobiography* and the *Spiritual Diary*.

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Feldmeier, *Christian Spirituality: Lived Expressions in the Life of the Church* (Winona, Minnesota: Anselm Academic, 2015), 175.

## 1.1. The *Autobiography*

Ignatius's *Autobiography* was written down by a Jesuit, Luis Goncalves da Câmara, from Ignatius's spoken narrative.<sup>6</sup> According to Nadal, "knowledge of Ignatius's life-story was of crucial importance for those later generations who could not know him in the flesh." It was Jeronimo Nadal who persuaded Ignatius to expound to them "how God had guided him from the beginning of his conversion, so that this exposition could take for us the place of a bequest and fatherly teaching,"<sup>7</sup> even though he did not want to talk about himself. Ignatius finally conceded, narrating God's activity in his life "as a way to assist his companions" and other people.<sup>8</sup> In this segment, let us go back to various stages in Ignatius's life in order to determine how God revealed to him God's will for his life.

### 1.1.1. Conversion at Loyola 1521 - 1522: From "Sword to Shoes"<sup>9</sup>

God speaks to people in various ways, calling them to collaborate with God's plan, depending upon the particular context. The battle injury at Pamplona in 1521 was a crisis in Ignatius's life in terms of distinguishing himself through military glory.<sup>10</sup> This unexpected event ended his military life and thus his dreams of fame and glory and service to the great lady. This means that his ambitions of knighthood, like the dream of

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean, translated., *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, (London; New York: Penguin Classics, 1997), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> John M. McManamon, *The Text and Contexts of Ignatius Loyola's "Autobiography,"* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), x.

<sup>9</sup> Hung Pham and Kathryn R. Barush, "From Sword to Shoes: Encountering Grace on the Camino Ignaciano," *Emory University*, no. 9 (2016): 148.

<sup>10</sup> George E. Ganss, ed., *Ignatius of Loyola: Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 14.

many men of Spain in the sixteenth-century, were closed. At the same time, it marked a crucial turning point in Ignatius' life: from working as an imperial knight in Spain, to becoming a knight in the service of Christ. His failure in battle was the starting point for God to work within him during his convalescence in Loyola.

After the injury, Ignatius's life was in peril. The doctors predicted that "unless he felt improvement by midnight [of the feast of Saints Peter and Paul] he could be counted as dead." Nevertheless, God healed Ignatius: "our Lord willed that that same midnight he should begin to find himself better" [*Autobiog*, 3]<sup>11</sup>. During the time of convalescence, Ignatius began to experience God's presence in his life.

Although his health improved day-by-day, he still had to remain in bed because he "could not hold himself well on his leg" [*Autobiog*, 5]. To pass the time, he asked for some books known as "tales of chivalry." These kinds of worldly books had always inspired Ignatius with "a secular and foolish desire to win fame" [*Autobiog*, 3]. Fortunately, however, his caregivers could not find those books and instead gave him a book on the life of Christ and a book on the lives of the saints [*Autobiog*, 5]. He read these books and was deeply inspired by their contents. Ignatius would read, pause, and think about the things he had read and the things to which he had been accustomed prior to this time [*Autobiog*, 6]. Little by little, he started to learn a new syntax and grammar—the language of God.

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<sup>11</sup> "Reminiscences or Autobiography of Ignatius as heard and written down by Luis Goncalves de Câmara Loyola," Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean, trans., *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, (London; New York: Penguin Classics, 1996). This translation is used throughout this investigation, unless otherwise noted. Hereafter [*Autobiog*].

God began to stir Ignatius's soul and draw him closer to conversion through these important books. He took time and reflected deeply on the things occurring in his mind:

These thoughts too used to last a good space, and, after other things between, the thoughts of the world mentioned above would follow, and on these too he would stop for a long while. And this succession of such different kinds of thoughts lasted a considerable time for him, with him always dwelling on the thought whose turn it was, whether this was of the former worldly deeds which he wanted to do, or of these latter from God which were occurring to his imagination, until the point came when he would leave them because of tiredness and attend to others things [*Autobiog*, 15].

As he meditated on these things, he began to imagine himself imitating the saints. When reading of the life of Our Lord and the saints, Ignatius reflected on the question, "what if I should do what St. Francis did, and what St. Dominic did?" During this time, Ignatius underwent an inner struggle to discern what he truly desired. He spent time deep in thought, arguing within himself. As a result, Ignatius discovered that "he was on fire, 'inflamed with the love of God'. He felt a 'great desire to imitate the saints' and formed 'a resolve to serve God in any way that God might ask of him'."<sup>12</sup> Ignatius was determined to learn the language of Dominic and Francis and thus resolved that "St. Dominic did this; therefore, I have to do it; St. Francis did this; therefore, I have to do it."<sup>13</sup>

Reflecting intently upon what came to mind, little by little, Ignatius began to pay attention to his feelings and his own interior movements. He came to know the different kinds of spirits which were stirring within him: "the one from the devil, and the other from God" [*Autobiog*, 8]. He recognized that the actions of the bad spirit excited him

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<sup>12</sup> James L. Connor, *The Dynamism of Desire: Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S. J., on The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola* (Saint Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2006), 38.

<sup>13</sup> Ganss, ed., *Ignatius of Loyola: Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, 70.

quickly, or made him sad and dry, whereas the good spirit strengthened him and inspired him to move toward God. From then on, he continued thinking more seriously about his past life and “how much need he had to do penance for it” [*Autobiog*, 9]. A conversion had begun. According to Fleming, the concept of “conversion” is rooted in the Scriptures and is understood as a “turning,”—commonly interpreted as “having a change of mind or a change of heart.” Moreover, conversion is not just a one-time event in life but an ongoing process with various inner movements.<sup>14</sup>

Ignatius became increasingly engaged in these books, stirring in him the desire to undertake a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, “with all the acts of discipline and all the acts of self-denial that a generous spirit, fired with God, generally wants to do” [*Autobiog*, 9]. Furthermore, he started to speak about God with other people in the house at Loyola. His desires were confirmed by a visitation from “Our Lady with the Holy Child, Jesus,” which left him at once with deep consolation and sickness at the sins of his past life, after which “he never again had even the slightest complicity in matters of the flesh” [*Autobiog*, 10].

As he continued to read, he noted the important things by which he was inspired:

Liking those books a lot, he had the idea of extracting certain things, briefly and in their essentials, from the lives of Christ and the saints. And so he set to writing a book ... The words of Christ were in red ink; those of Our Lady in blue ink... Part of the time he would spend in writing, part in prayer [*Autobiog*, 9].

Most of his time was spent reading, reflecting, praying, writing, and talking about God. Undoubtedly, the outward injury at Pamplona led to inner transformation: to prayer and the desire to live in penance and serve God. Gradually, all these things drew Ignatius

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<sup>14</sup> David L. Fleming, ed., *Contemporary Annotations: Ignatian Exercises*, The best of the Review 4 (St. Louis, Mo: Review for Religious, 1996), 74–5.

closer to God and helped him to distinguish the bad from the good, worldly values from heavenly values.

Ignatius's experience with God reflects the dynamism of the God-human relationship explored in the previous chapter. Step by step, Ignatius learns God's language through the events in his life, including what seemed to be the losses and failures. Although such failure and loss in life might prevent one from coming to God, it may also open a new way to learn the language of God as one reflects upon God's presence and activity in all the things that happen in one's life (both negative and positive). Ignatius reflected deeply on the things he had read, and listened attentively to his desires and his inner movements in order to discern God's will. Through the grace of God and his own effort, Ignatius was steadily being transformed. Similarly, in the spiritual life, we can cultivate an intimate relationship with God by persistently listening to God's words in deep silence and prayer so that we are able to intensify our awareness of the presence of God and gradually recognize God's voice in our inner life.

### **1.1.2. Deepening the Relationship with God**

If Loyola is the starting point of Ignatius's conversion process, Montserrat and Manresa are the places in which he deepened his relationship with God and surrendered his life to God. For Ignatius, intentions and actions went hand in hand. After leaving his home in Loyola, Ignatius began seriously practicing his good intentions through acts of penance, with an eye toward "pleasing and being agreeable to God" [*Autobiog*, 14], even though he did not understand much about the Christian virtues or the interior life at this point:

When he would make up his mind to do some penance that the saints did, his aim was to do the same, and more besides. And in these thoughts he had all his

consolation, not considering anything within himself, nor knowing what humility was, or charity, or patience, or discernment in regulating and balancing these virtues [*Autobiog*, 14].

Though he began to live an ascetical life for the glory of God, his soul was still blind [*Autobiog*, 13]. This means that he was not yet able to speak the language of God. He seemed to be groping for answers to his questions, but did not yet know the proper means for discovering the truth. An example of his decision-making process in these early days is the encounter with a Moor on the road, whom Ignatius perceived as having insulted the blessed Virgin's honor by claiming she did not remain a virgin after giving birth to Jesus [*Autobiog*, 15]. In this case, after growing "tired of analyzing what it would be good to do, and not finding anything definite on which to decide," Ignatius let the direction of his mule determine whether he would follow the Moor and kill him to defend the honor of Our Lady, or take another direction—to Montserrat [*Autobiog*, 16]. This anecdote is not only important for reflecting upon the beginnings of Ignatius's attempt to discover the mechanisms of the discernment process in completely uncharted territory, but also for other issues. The first concerns the symbol of the mule. John M. McManamon points out that typically, a mule is not a means of travel for pilgrims (most walked, or if they were wealthy, traveled by horse or carriage). McManamon suggests that in traveling by mule, Ignatius "identifies himself too closely with the Lord" in his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.<sup>15</sup> Second, at the moment of encountering the Moor, Ignatius still stresses external deeds of glory (albeit for the Lord), resolved to outdo the saints in their penances and accomplishments. He had not yet learned the language of the interior life and the "critical virtues of humility, charity, and patience." Faith is a gift

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<sup>15</sup> McManamon, *The Text and Contexts of Ignatius Loyola's "Autobiography,"* 21.

from God, and for this reason, we cannot constrain others to believe as we do by threatening to take their lives.<sup>16</sup>

Through this incident, we can see that Ignatius was still very much in control at that point, speaking his own language and being led by his own lights. It is crucial to note here that Ignatius had no spiritual guide and was forced through trial and error to uncover the manner in which God revealed God's will in a given situation. Only later would he come to develop a deeper sensitivity to God's workings in his life and the proper methods for discerning God's will.

His devotion to God and Our Lady increased, and was expressed in concrete actions: keeping a "vigil of arms" for a whole night, making general confession, hanging his sword and dagger at the altar of Our Lady, stripping off his clothes and clothing himself "in the armour of Christ" [*Autobiog*, 17]. In all his actions, Ignatius expressed his intention to do all good things for the glory of God.

In Manresa, Ignatius struggled with temptations from the evil spirit and disturbances such as the compulsion to kill himself or to give up the holy life. In order to deal with these temptations, he increased his prayer time, asking God to help him, fasting, confessing, having spiritual conversation with holy people, and all other good things. He also began to pay serious attention to his inner movements, and recognized "the great variations in his soul" [*Autobiog*, 21] such as not experiencing much relish or savour in prayer or in hearing Mass, or, in contrast, the many consolations when the sadness and desolation were lifted from his soul.

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<sup>16</sup> McManamon, 21-4.

Ignatius did not give up practicing the good things for the glory of God, even though he became frightened by all these variations in his soul. He continued to scrutinize carefully “the means through which that spirit had come” [*Autobiog*, 25]. Through these experiences, he gradually began to distinguish the desolations and consolations—whether they came from God or from the evil spirit. Thus, all these experiences led him to sharpen his relationship with God and his capacity for discernment of the spirits. Ignatius gradually understood that God was working within him—through all the things that happened to him and the people he encountered. In this way, God is teaching him a new kind of language, like a teacher with his/her student [*Autobiog*, 27].

### **1.1.3. Ways to Recognize and Distinguish the “Will of God”**

Ignatius always desired “to seek perfection and what might be more for the glory of God” and for helping souls [*Autobiog*, 36]. Therefore, he persisted in imitating the saints, going barefoot to Jerusalem, following Jesus’ footsteps to the sacred sites in the Holy Land and undertaking acts of discipline and self-denial in spite of many troubles and challenges. Keeping these intentions in mind, Ignatius wanted to remain in Jerusalem forever because he felt much devotion visiting those places. At that time, he was firm in his intentions and still pursuing his own will. However, he had to change his mind, and obeyed the Provincial of the Franciscan Order to leave the Holy Land, finally having to concede that “it was not the will of Our Lord” for him to stay in Jerusalem [*Autobiog*,47].

It is significant to note that this is the first time the phrase “the Will of God” appears in the *Autobiography*.<sup>17</sup>

We can see the transformation process in Ignatius’s spiritual life. If before the Jerusalem journey, he focused on his own intentions and carried them out in his own ways, in Jerusalem, and later in his life, he focused on God, and sought to conform his will to God’s will. Through faithful prayer and self-examination, Ignatius took time to deepen himself in the relationship with God and create more space for God. He increasingly developed his capacity to discern the good and the better things in a larger context, and he gradually encountered the will of God for his life in a concrete situation. Recognizing that staying in Jerusalem was not God’s will (though it was a good and noble thing in itself), Ignatius made a decision to study Latin, philosophy and theology after long time of prayer and seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit. It can be said that Ignatius continues learning the language of God.

In Alcalá, and after that in Paris, Ignatius sought people who wanted to serve God and help souls. Ignatius and his companions determined to go to Jerusalem where they would proclaim the Gospel and care for souls. However, they met “many things opposing them” and they resolved instead to go to Rome [*Autobiog*, 97]. Moreover, Ignatius had a spiritual vision at La Storta when he was praying. He “saw so clearly that God the Father was putting him with Christ, his Son, that he would not have the willfulness to have any doubt about this: it could only be that God the Father was putting him with his Son” [*Autobiog*, 96]. This spiritual vision is significant to Ignatius at that

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<sup>17</sup> Ignacio Echarte, ed., *An Ignatian Concordance* (Bilbao: Maliaño: Mensajero; Sal Terrae, 1996), 1347–1349. The phrase the “will of God” appears 67 times in Ignatius’s writings (14 times in Ej, 34 in Co, 6 in Au, and 13 in De).

time because it serves as a confirmation from God of his prayer and decision. Placing himself in God's hands, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Ignatius kept his eyes on Christ, carrying the cross and realizing that God wanted him and his companions to serve God in other places. Thus, Ignatius and his companions stayed in Rome to serve Christ and help souls under the representative of Christ, the Pope. Through this decision, Ignatius became more humble, flexible, and much wiser in his options and actions.

All these things were for the glory of God, which became the ultimate end of his every action.<sup>18</sup> Thus, it is "to be sought in every action," and "every choice among actions is a choice among means to that end."<sup>19</sup> Jules J. Toner indicates that for Ignatius,

Glory means participation in God, transformation of created life by its union with God in Christ, in which God is present and revealed to his creatures. This glory of God in creation is for Ignatius praise for God, honor for God, declaration of his beauty and goodness and wisdom and power in a more fundamental sense than any human thoughts and words and affections about God.<sup>20</sup>

Examining carefully the *Autobiography*, we can understand how God worked in his life and see a dynamic process in which Ignatius learned to recognize and to do God's will in his life. First, he had an authentic desire to do good things for the glory of God. Then, he faithfully prayed over these desires, paid strict attention to his own feelings and emotions, and reflected on these inner movements. At each stage, the language became more sophisticated and complex. Based on this manner of self-examination, Ignatius learned to recognize and distinguish the different kinds of spirits working within him. By proceeding in this way, Ignatius became familiar with God's voice through the work of

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<sup>18</sup> See [*Autobiog* 50, 55]. Here it is worth noting that the phrase "for the glory of God" appears around 60 times in Ignatius's writings. See Echarte, *An Ignatian Concordance*, 563-6.

<sup>19</sup> Toner, *Discerning God's Will*, 14.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

the good spirit. The signs of spiritual visions, consolations, and desolations helped him be more convinced of the will of God in all his intentions and his actions. For further insight into Ignatius's understanding of the "will of God" and his decision-making process, I examine his *Spiritual Diary* in the following segment.

## 1.2. The *Spiritual Diary*

According to Joseph Munitiz, the *Spiritual Diary* is "one of the very few of his works that survive in their original hand-written form."<sup>21</sup> It was written in 1544-45 solely by Ignatius himself without the assistance of his secretary and was published nearly 400 years later by A. Codina.<sup>22</sup> Ignatius wrote these pages in a very complex situation of a decision-making process concerning the degree of poverty of the new order, which was canonically approved in 1540. A year later, in 1541, Ignatius was elected as the first General of the Society of Jesus. The new order was expanding rapidly "in numbers and in the diverse directions of its personnel and their occupations."<sup>23</sup> They had to deal with many problems in which the issue of monetary income became crucial—whether to embrace radical poverty and exist as beggars, trusting solely in God, or to keep some income aside in order to provide opportunities for furthering the education of the companions, increased prayer time, and adequate time for apostolic work.

Ignatius realized that the principles involved were of radical importance. First, there was the complex question of poverty itself: he was sufficiently aware of life's reality to appreciate that absolute poverty might spell the end of the new order by any normal calculus of human probability. Secondly, his own authority would be particularly tested: for the first time, he would have to exercise on a

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<sup>21</sup> Ignatius of Loyola, "The Spiritual Diary," in *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, trans. Munitiz Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (London; New York: Penguin Classics, 1996). This translation of the "Spiritual Diary" is used throughout this study unless otherwise noted. Hereafter [*Sp.Di*].

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Munitiz, "The Spiritual Diary of Ignatius Loyola" (n.d.): 101.

<sup>23</sup> [*Sp.Di*, intro].

grand scale the power so gladly entrusted to him and so reluctantly accepted. And by a cruel twist of fate, the first point appeared to be one in which he would have to revoke a decision already approved by the early companions.<sup>24</sup>

In brief, Ignatius kept his eyes on Christ. He felt compelled to embrace the total poverty to which they were bound. Poverty held deep significance for Ignatius. Poverty is the way to contemplate and imitate Jesus Christ, the One who was so poor and afflicted. Pursuing radical poverty led the Jesuits to trust solely in God's providence, cutting off "everything of the world" so that they might obtain "greater freedom of spirit, and with more efficacy, of all spiritual things that are for the greater profit of souls." Moreover, in keeping with the emptying experience of La Storta, he reasoned that choosing true poverty would help them to be more humble, "more diligent in helping others, and more ready to travel and suffer hardships."<sup>25</sup>

Munitiz indicates that the *Spiritual Diary* should be seen and read only in that context so that readers can understand the reason Ignatius had to deal with these struggles. Moreover, reading the work from this perspective helps readers to recognize that *The Spiritual Diary* is not understood in the normal sense of the term "Diary." Therefore, the significance of *The Spiritual Diary* "lies in the fact that it shows the first movements of a great soul struggling to enter with determination on a hazardous journey."<sup>26</sup> Following this trajectory, I continue to examine how Ignatius interpreted the phrase "the will of God," focusing on the aspect of discernment in this particular experience.

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<sup>24</sup> [*Sp.Di*, intro].

<sup>25</sup> [*Sp.Di*, Pros and Cons, 10].

<sup>26</sup> Munitiz, "The Spiritual Diary of Ignatius Loyola," 103.

### **1.2.1. The Decision-Making Process**

Ignatius had a close relationship with God through faithful prayer. For Ignatius, prayer plays a crucial role in communicating with God and praising God. The ultimate end of his actions was the glory of God. During the decision-making process, we can see how Ignatius collaborated with God's grace in order to resolve the problem. Ignatius desired intensely to seek God's will. Therefore, step by step, he dealt with this matter of poverty by exposing and offering it to God. We can say that the experience at La Storta appeared again to Ignatius. Thus, he looked at this issue from different angles, and weighed the pros and cons. And he fervently prayed to God, asking God to assist him in resolving it according to God's will. He took sufficient time to reflect on his thoughts and emotions which surfaced during the prayer, weighed the choices, and asked for God's confirmation.

The *Spiritual Diary* reflects a soul deeply engaged with God in every moment, unfolding the interaction between God and Ignatius. Encountering Ignatius's writings, we can see that he had a deep awareness of the presence of Our Lady and the Trinity in his life. He was always aware of the loving presence of God and the Blessed Mother while he was praying and celebrating Mass: "I saw the Mother and Son ready and willing to intercede with the Father; both then and during the day I was set on poverty and still more moved it" [*Sp.Di*, p. I, 4].

Ignatius was profoundly united with God in every moment of the day: in the morning, in the afternoon, at night, and before, during, and after celebrating Mass, his thoughts and actions were ever turned toward God and Our Lady. That is one of ways he communicated with God. Furthermore, in prayer, he listened to God and frequently asked

the Blessed Mother to intercede for him so that God might give him the Spirit to assist him and enlighten him concerning how to make a decision according to God's will. He experienced that God was always with him and gave him many spiritual gifts. Thus, throughout the day, he felt "a warmth and a remarkable devotion" [*Sp.Di*, p. I, 5]. This feeling remained with him constantly, and he therefore repeated this phrase many times in the *Diary*. All these spiritual joys led him to increase his love for God.

### **1.2.2. Inner Movements in Seeking God's Will**

Encountering the *Spiritual Diary*, we see the concrete experiences in which Ignatius learned and trusted God's language. Ignatius honestly expressed his feelings and paid attention to his interior movements. In the *Autobiography*, Ignatius experienced the working of different spirits by God's grace and through an analysis of his feelings and his inner movements. In the *Spiritual Diary*, he persistently immersed himself in God and reflected upon whatever thoughts came to him. This led him to more awareness of the presence of the loving God in every moment, allowed God to work within him, and revealed God's will for him.

During this time, we can say that Ignatius was studying a new kind of grammar, and he practices it through his daily life in order to understand the language of God. Ignatius narrated that he had many tears before, during, and after celebrating Masses and praying. He repeated many times the phrase "great devotion and tears" [*Sp.Di*, p. I, 6]. According to Timothy M. Gallagher, tears may convey different meanings. In the context of the *Spiritual Diary*, tears are like a kind of spiritual consolation—"tears that move to love of [the] Lord."<sup>27</sup> These tears are signs of the movements of the heart toward God.

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<sup>27</sup> Timothy M. Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Living* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005), 54.

Ignatius felt great devotion and had many tears “before and during mass.” Thus, “the tears that the good spirit inspires are healing, strengthening, blessed tears that physically express the consolation of the heart in God.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, Ignatius is involved in praying and senses God’s closeness and love with his whole person—physically, cognitively, and emotionally.

I desired to make this offering to the Father through the meditation and prayers of the Mother and Son. First, I prayed her to assist me before her Son and Father. Next, I implored the Son that together with the Mother He might help me before the Father. Then, I felt within me that I approached, or was taken before, the Father, and with this moment my hair rose and I felt what seemed very remarkable burning in every part of my body, followed by tears and the most intense devotion [*Sp.Di*, p. I, 7].

Ignatius became completely immersed in prayer and went deeper in intimacy with God and Our Lady. Later, he wrote down whatever happened to him and reflected on it. He recognized that by this time, he had yet fresher devotion or “a new experience of devotion” [*Sp.Di*, p. I, 7]. Ignatius scrutinized his feelings and interior movements because it helped him to realize the actions of the good spirit. For instance, he felt “considerable devotion . . . a certain elation . . . great tranquility of soul . . . interior peace . . . a new interior impulse of devotion and tears,” and so on [*Sp.Di*, p. I, 7 - 14]. These signs enabled him to be certain of God’s grace and love for him. More important, these signs of consolation reflected God’s confirmation about the rightness of his decision. At the same time, the more Ignatius grew in intimacy with God, the wiser the evil spirit became in its tactics, sometimes even able to mimic God’s consolation. Thus, Ignatius was very careful with the movements in his soul, even the consolations.

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<sup>28</sup> Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 44.

In short, reading carefully the *Autobiography* and the *Spiritual Diary*, we can recognize the dynamic movement of Ignatius's conversion process, and the deepening interior transformation of his spiritual life. Ignatius was totally aware of the presence of God and was becoming familiar with the way God worked within him. At the same time, he was faithful and active in collaborating with God's grace in order to be united with God and to seek God's will. Ignatius gradually moved deeper and deeper into the mystical relationship with God. He felt so much love for Jesus that he desired to "die with him rather than live with anyone else" [*Sp.Di*, p. I, 30]. This desire strengthened and encouraged him so that he felt "no fear but found a certain confidence in, and love from the Blessed Trinity" [*Sp.Di*, p. I, 32].

Inner movements led Ignatius to move toward the Blessed Trinity and to submission to God. His love for God moved to a yet deeper level: whenever he mentioned God, he seemed to be "penetrated so deeply with a submission and reverent humility so admirable, that they seemed to defy description" [*Sp.Di*, p. II, 1]. Ignatius had many spiritual visions of the Divine Being. This led him to "many intuitions and much new interior knowledge" [*Sp.Di*, p. II, 17]. However, he later came to believe "anything to be for the best, according to how God Our Lord acted and willed, visitation or no visitation" [*Sp.Di*, p. II, 17]. We can see Ignatius's inner transformation in this process: the spiritual gifts consoled, strengthened, and helped him move forward to God, but he learned to be content in all circumstances, with or without gifts, and to accept whatever transpired as God's will.

Ignatius always looked for the glory of God as the ultimate end of his intentions and his actions. Furthermore, in Ignatius's works, we can see that he was deeply

conscious of what was going on within him. He reflected upon and analyzed his feelings and emotions, and the diverse movements in his soul. He had to spend nearly forty years learning the language of God. This means that he learned to analyze his interior movements so that he could discern God's will. It can be concluded that interior movements are a kind of language by which God communicates with Ignatius. These experiences narrated in the *Autobiography* and the *Spiritual Diary* continue in the *Spiritual Exercises*, particularly in the Rules of Discernment [313 – 336].<sup>29</sup>

## **2. Rules of Discernment and the “Will of God”**

### **2.1. The first set of rules of Discernment**

I will examine the first set of Rules in the following order: the Title [313]; the initial principles (Rules 1 and 2); the descriptive definition of consolation and attitudes towards these kinds of spiritual experiences (Rules 3, 10, and 11); the description of desolation, ways of dealing with desolation, the reasons for desolation (Rules 4, 5 to 8 and 9); and some common tactics of the evil spirit (Rules 12 to 14).<sup>30</sup> Before investigating the rules, it is important to understand the meaning of the term “spirits” in order to distinguish their respective characteristics. In the Ignatian tradition, the concept of “spirits” refers variously to “the Holy Spirit and to created spirits, both the good ones, those who are commonly called angels, and the evil ones, those who are commonly called

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<sup>29</sup> Ignatius of Loyola, “The Spiritual Exercises,” in *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, trans. Munitiz Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Endean (London; New York: Penguin Classics, 1996). This translation of the “Spiritual Exercises” is used throughout this study unless otherwise noted. Hereafter [Sp.Ex].

<sup>30</sup> Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2000), 209.

Satan and demons.”<sup>31</sup> Toner also sees a broader application of the term “evil spirits,” one which refers not only to Satan and the demons, but also includes “the tendencies in our psyches which spring from egoism and disordered sensuality and also from other individual human persons or society insofar as these are an influence for evil in our lives.”<sup>32</sup> This understanding helps us in detecting the language of consolation and desolation.

### **2.1.1. *The Title* [SpEx, 313]**

From the very beginning of the conversion process, Ignatius was aware of the working of the different spirits within him: “the Spirit of God and the spirit of evil.” Through prayer and self-examination, and with God’s grace, Ignatius began to understand the nuances of the inner movements, and recognized within himself the all-consuming impulse to do everything for the glory of God and serve souls. Thus, right in the title of the teaching on discernment for the first week, Ignatius spells out the objective of the rules:

Rules by which to perceive and understand to some extent the various movements produced in the soul: the good that they may be accepted and the bad that they may be rejected. Rules more suitable for the first week [SpEx, 313].

According to Gallagher, this dense introductory statement consists of three key steps in the discernment of spirits: awareness, understanding, and taking action (accepting/rejecting).<sup>33</sup> This threefold paradigm amounts to *listening* to the sounds,

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<sup>31</sup> Jules J. Toner, “Discernment in the Spiritual Exercises,” in *A New Introduction to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, with a foreword by Walter J. Burghardt SJ, ed. John E. Dister (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 64.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 17.

*learning* the language, and engaging in the *speaking* of the language, and is crucial in discernment.

Regarding the first step, perceiving or being aware, Ignatius advises exercitants to pay close attention to the movements in their thoughts, hearts, and minds. Toner notes that by the different “motions” in the soul, Ignatius means

The flux of thoughts (such as judgments about God, self, the world, plans, lines of reasoning, lines of association, or imaginings), and of affective acts (such as love, hate, desire, or fear), and of affective feelings (such as peace, warmth, coldness, sweetness, bitterness, buoyancy, or depression).<sup>34</sup>

These various movements may be prompted by God or by the evil spirit, including that of disorder. Perceiving, or “being aware,” is extremely important because it expresses “a crucial transition from one spiritual situation to another.”<sup>35</sup> If exercitants ignore interior motions in their spiritual life, they may not recognize the good spirit stirring within their souls. Thus, “perceiving” is “the gateway to all discernment.”<sup>36</sup> However, “being aware” of what is happening within the soul can be challenging to exercitants because people have a tendency to focus their awareness outside of themselves rather than within.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the need for silence and attentiveness becomes important.

Understanding is the second step Ignatius mentions in the introduction. From the outset, Ignatius reflected upon what happened to him, “little by little coming to know the difference in kind of spirits that were stirring: the one from the devil, and the other from God” [*Autobiog*, 8]. In order to be able to act properly, exercitants must understand the

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<sup>34</sup> Toner, *Discernment of Spirits*, 39.

<sup>35</sup> Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 17.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

movements within their souls. Toner explains that interpreting a movement consists of at least three things.

First, we must recognize the characteristic features by which it is distinguished from other motions. Second, we see the direction in which it of itself points or leads us, its likely or actually effected consequences. Third, we know its origin. In a spiritual understanding, we recognize those features which distinguish spiritually significant motions from others; and among the former, we distinguish one sort from another.<sup>38</sup>

A very clear awareness of “the origin and direction of spiritual stirrings” in the soul is crucial for exercitants because it helps them to recognize the guidance of the Holy Spirit.<sup>39</sup>

A thorough understanding of inner movements is not an end in itself, however, but must lead to the third step—taking action: “to accept or reject.” After recognizing the work of the Holy Spirit, exercitants are called to undertake an action “accepting what is of God and equally firmly rejecting what is not.”<sup>40</sup> These three steps play a crucial role in discernment, and though they are intertwined, the order is essential.

The threefold paradigm is the means of interaction between God and humans. God reveals God’s will through the work of the Holy Spirit. Humans, in their freedom, collaborate with God’s grace by disposing themselves ever more to indifference so as to be moved by God’s will, intently reflecting upon their thoughts, feelings, and emotions, and taking action to respond to God’s call.

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<sup>38</sup> Toner, *Discernment of Spirits*, 42-3.

<sup>39</sup> Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 24.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

The following rules assist exercitants step by step to distinguish the characteristics and tactics of the bad spirit and the good spirit working within their souls. Here it is important to note, however, that rules of discernment are not mathematical. With regard to the language of God, rules work more guidelines on how to compose poetry. When one first begins to learn a language, the grammar functions as a fixed structure to assist the learner to speak or write correctly. When one moves into creative writing or poetry, however, the rules becomes a structure that yields more to creativity. Regarding the rules of discernment, it is important to keep in mind that even knowing all the rules by heart does not guarantee that we will be able to determine God's will precisely. There is certain syntax to guide our language, but language in its nature is limited to fully communicate the reality. Similarly, the rules of discernment give us a certain map of how God communicates but do not fully capture God's language. It is an ongoing relationship, a "dance" between the lover and the beloved.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, the candidate may have to rely on a more mystical and personal way of ongoing encounter with God, for the language of God often transcends rules and formulas. The result looks more like poetry or music.

### ***2.1.2. Fundamental Directions in Spiritual Life: Rules 1 and 2***

As exercitants seek to progress in the spiritual life, they will not be transformed if they do not know their own spiritual situations. Thus, in the first two rules, Ignatius identifies the two fundamental directions of the spiritual life and their corresponding effects.

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<sup>41</sup> Hung Trung Pham, "Prayer in the Ignatian Tradition," in Robert J. Wicks, ed., *Prayer in the Catholic Tradition: A Handbook of Practical Approaches* (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2016). Kindle.

The first one is related to a movement away from God and toward mortal sin. In this situation, the evil spirit “makes them imagine sensual satisfactions and gratifications, in order to retain and reinforce them in their vices and sins” [Rule 1]. The enemy works in the imagination of such people, evoking in them sinful desires so that they continue moving away from God. With these people, the Holy Spirit uses an opposite way to work within their souls, “causing pricks of conscience and feelings of remorse by means of the power of rational moral judgment.”<sup>42</sup> In this regard, Gallagher indicates that “if the enemy works in the *imagination* of these persons, the good spirit works in their *conscience*.”<sup>43</sup> In this way, the good spirit awakens in them an authentic understanding of the unhealthy state of their souls.

The second direction consists of a movement toward God and away from serious sin.<sup>44</sup> For those who seek to grow in their relationship with God and strive to move away from mortal sin, the bad spirit tries to weaken them and obstruct their progress by harassing them and causing within them sadness and disturbance of soul. In contrast, the good spirit imparts “courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations and quiet, making things easy and removing all obstacles” so that the person keeps advancing toward God [*SpEx*, 315]. It is extremely important for people to be aware of their spiritual circumstances and distinguish the signs of the spirits in order to move forward in doing good and seeking God.

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<sup>42</sup> Pham, “Prayer in the Ignatian Tradition.”

<sup>43</sup> Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 36.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

Ignatius helps people to understand the inner movements in the soul, namely spiritual consolation and desolation. Understanding the two poles and their effects plays a crucial role in the discernment of spirits and leads people to open their hearts to the Holy Spirit. In other words, for Ignatius, the movements of consolation and desolation are the foundational syntax of God's language. The following segments examine each in turn.

### **2.1.3. *Spiritual Consolation***

#### *Definition of spiritual consolation*

Ignatius experienced different kinds of consolation such as great devotion, interior impulses of love for Jesus, sobbing and tears, tranquility, elation, and so forth [*Sp.Di*, p.I, 7-8, 30]. Thus, in Rule 3, he elucidates the nature of consolation from God, which has its own nuances and purposes. First, these consolations must lead the soul “to become inflamed with the love of her Creator and Lord” [Rule 3]. This element integrates the love of God and love of creatures. According to Michael Ivens, Ignatius refers to “a love defined not only in terms of God himself but a love of God in which all other loves are included.”<sup>45</sup> Toner elaborates the consequences of this integrative love: “the act of intense love for God to which the Holy Spirit moves the one consoled absorbs, as it were, all love for creatures so that they can be loved only in God and God in them.”<sup>46</sup>

Second, the word “consolation” is used when “one sheds tears that lead to love of one's Lord” [Rule 3]. In this description, we should be aware that “tears” are not equal to “consolation.” Tears may convey various meanings. In the context of the Exercises,

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<sup>45</sup> Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, 215.

<sup>46</sup> Jules J. Toner, *Discernment of Spirits, A Commentary on St. Ignatius' Rules, A Guide to the Principles and Practices, Third Printing, 1995*, n.d., 97.

Ignatius states that tears are like a kind of spiritual consolation—“tears that lead to love of one’s Lord” [Rule 3]. These tears are a sign of the movement of the heart towards God. For instance, an individual sheds tears because she is moved by God’s tenderness and God’s incomprehensible love.<sup>47</sup> Jeronimo Nadal notes that there are also tears of sorrow or sadness in these consolations “at seeing one’s soul separated from what it loves so much and not able to go and enjoy at once what it so much desires. . . .And there are also tears of sadness at one’s own sins and those of others.” These forms of consolation can be “difficult to explain.”<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, if an individual is in the process of moving from disorder to order in her life, she might shed tears when confronting her difficulties. Thus, when an individual has tears “with the appropriate source and consequence,” that person can be said to have spiritual consolation.<sup>49</sup> Accordingly, consolation is neither a sense of superficial happiness nor a force coming from outside oneself; rather, it arises from deep within.

Finally, consolation leads to “increase of hope, faith, and charity” [Rule 3], the three core theological virtues. Ignatius develops the experience of consolation in relation to these virtues, which are “habitually present in the dedicated person as a legacy of baptism.”<sup>50</sup> For Ignatius, spiritual consolation means an experience in which “living faith is not only increased but is recognized by the believer as such faith now increased in depth or firmness or purity or intensity or diffusiveness or effectiveness, so that it issues

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<sup>47</sup> Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 54.

<sup>48</sup> Jeronimo Nadal, “From the Ignatian Tradition: On Consolation,” in *The Way*, 43/3 (July 2004), 51.

<sup>49</sup> Toner, *Discernment of Spirits, A Commentary on St. Ignatius’ Rules*, 101.

<sup>50</sup> Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 54-5.

in feelings of peace, joy, contentment, confidence, exultation, and the like.”<sup>51</sup> However, spiritual consolation is absent when an excess of these delightful feelings do not arise from the wellspring of the living faith. At the same time, a vital faith without the presence of such feelings will also fail to produce spiritual consolation. In other words, spiritual consolation “has to include an assured experience of living faith and the affective feelings of which such experience can be the source.”<sup>52</sup>

*Things do to in consolation*

In Rules 10 and 11, Ignatius advises that when in consolation, one must “consider how one will bear oneself in the desolation that will follow later” [Rule 10]. In other words, exercitants should maintain balance in the spiritual life. They should prepare to strive against spiritual desolation because consolation may last only for a certain period of time. For this reason, Ignatius admonishes people to be wiser in spiritual life. Regarding this point, Gallagher states that if people are well prepared in terms of the inevitable desolation, with the grace of God, desolation “is much less likely to harm us.”<sup>53</sup> Further, Ignatius counsels people concerning how to think and act during the periods of consolation and desolation so that they may continue growing in the spiritual life, advising discerning persons “to live with spiritual balance and maturity, neither thoughtlessly ‘high’ in spiritual consolation nor helplessly ‘low’ in spiritual desolation.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, 112.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 131-8.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

### *Reasons for consolation*

Spiritual consolation is a gift of God. It is not for the purpose of resting, but a means to enable us to move forward [Rule 11]. We are enveloped in God's unconditional love and mercy. Thus, God wants to bestow upon us a personal gift to strengthen our understanding. God also provides us with more "clarity and light with which the intellectual sight of interior things can be sharpened" so that we can grow in the spiritual life.<sup>55</sup> Accordingly, Ignatius advises us not be attached to consolation, but to be humble.

#### **2.1.4 Spiritual Desolation**

##### *Definition of spiritual desolation*

In the fourth rule, Ignatius discusses spiritual desolation, the opposite of the movement of consolation investigated above. He called desolation every movement of emotionality or sensibility contrary to consolation. These may include darkness, disturbance, attraction toward worldly values, anxiety, or temptations. All this will lead the person to a lack of confidence, hope and love, laziness, lukewarmness, and sadness. The result is that the person tends to move away from God. In order to help exercitants recognize the movements within themselves and to rightly order these motions, Ignatius counsels them to be aware of these movements.

Though it is not easy, it is important to distinguish the differences between depression and desolation. Both have similar characteristics, including a complaint referring to past experience, the weakening of the faculties of the will, and the diminishment of "a whole dynamism of life and of interest in the outside world."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Nadal, "On Consolation," 50.

<sup>56</sup> Brigitte-Violaine Aufaue, "Depression and Spiritual Desolation," in *The Way*, 42/3 (July 2003), (London: Penguin, 1984), 51-2.

However, for one in spiritual desolation, her sufferings, darkness, or sadness refer mainly to the personal relationship with God, and concern “how the effects of consolation have disappeared.”<sup>57</sup> In other words, a person in desolation is in a “depressed and a gloomy mood” and experiences “feelings of discouragement.”<sup>58</sup> In contrast, a person who is depressed suffers from emotional distress more generally. In depression, one is concerned about her own image, the faculties are inhibited, and the “root cause lies in unconscious processes.”<sup>59</sup>

#### *Things to do in time of desolation*

Ignatius counsels those who are in desolation should never make any change while in desolation, but stand firm in their former resolutions and decisions [Rule 5]. Exercitants are advised to make the effort to handle desolation by asking God for help. Thus, they should be more intent on prayer and meditation. In addition, they are called to cooperate with God’s grace by increasing the frequency of their exams in the light of grace and faith, increasing practices of penance in suitable ways in order to make more space for God in their lives [Rule 6]. In addition, they should think positively and “remain in an attitude of patience” because desolation will not last “if one uses all one’s powers against this desolation” [Rule 7-8].

#### *Reasons for desolation*

Concerning the desolation which may be harmful to the soul, Ignatius alerts exercitants about three main reasons for desolation [Rule 9]. The first concerns laziness,

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<sup>57</sup> Aufauve, 51-2.

<sup>58</sup> Toner, *Discernment of Spirits, A Commentary on St. Ignatius’ Rules*, 125.

<sup>59</sup> Aufauve, 52.

carelessness, or lukewarmness in the commitment to the spiritual life. Second, desolation happens to test exercitants in terms of the quality of their relationship with God—whether they will remain in the love of God and faithful service without the rewards of consolation. The final reason is to show us that we cannot on our own awaken or sustain deep love, tears, devotion, or any form of consolation, but must recognize these as gifts of grace from God. In this way, we do not become full of pride or vainglory. Thus, as Ivens notes, desolation helps exercitants to root themselves in the “fundamental truth about the human person and God.”<sup>60</sup>

*The tactics of distraction*

In this first week, the language of the enemy becomes increasingly deceitful. So far, we have seen how Ignatius centers on the two kinds of spiritual experiences: consolation and desolation, aiming to free exercitants from subjugation to spiritual desolation and its effects. In the last three Rules of the first set, Ignatius directly addresses three features or tactics of the evil spirit to which exercitants need to pay particular attention, and instructs them on how to act directly against the realm of the enemy. First, if exercitants are spiritually strong, the enemy is weak, and vice versa [Rule 12]. Second, the evil spirit will take advantage of the secrets of exercitants’ souls to attack them [Rule 13]. Thus, exercitants should bring to light the hidden things in spiritual life in order to attain spiritual freedom. Finally, people should be aware of their strong points as well as their weaknesses, the latter of which the enemy can easily attack [Rule 14].

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<sup>60</sup> Ivens., 221.

From Ignatius's personal experience, he was extremely aware of how crucial the inner movements and human emotions are in seeking God's will. Therefore, through the first set of the rules of discernment, Ignatius unfolds the diversity, complexity, and significance of interior motions and their influences in spiritual life. Step by step, Ignatius helps exercitants to become familiar with God's language through their emotions in order to grow in love and to move toward God. It is important for exercitants to be aware that consolation and desolation are not under their control. They should understand themselves well and the workings of the spirits within them so that they can collaborate with God's grace in their ongoing spiritual journey: to be guided by the Holy Spirit and to reject any influence that is contrary to the divine movement within their souls. Whereas in the first week, evil appeared as what it is, that is, there was no disconnect between the phenomenon and the reality, in the rules for the second week, Ignatius helps exercitants recognize the disjunction between the two—"when the phenomenon is good but the reality is actually evil."<sup>61</sup>

## **2.2. The Second Set of Rules of Discernment**

The more the devoted person desires union with God, the more language becomes complicated with regard to the language of true love and the language of false love. Knowing that the enemy can appear under the guise of good, Ignatius helps devoted persons to distinguish the inner movements with regard to experiences of the language of love (consolation). The second set of Rules is more applicable to the second week, for

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<sup>61</sup> Michael J. Buckley, *The Structure of the Rules for Discernment of Spirits*, 31.

those who are called to live “the interiorized love-relationship, known as the ‘illuminative way,’ and hence [are] growing in integrity of intention and in spiritual sensitivity.”<sup>62</sup>

Aware of the important role of inner movements in communicating with God and seeking God’s will, Ignatius addresses the “specious arguments, subtleties,” and fallacies brought forward by the enemy [*SpEx*, 328-29]. He seeks to alert devotees to further dangers that the enemy might try to lead them away from God. At the same time, he guides them on how to act against the evil spirit in order to keep following the Holy Spirit’s direction to true gladness, peace, and joy.

In the previous segment, we discussed the spiritual consolation which comes from God, heartens souls, and leads mature persons to love God more deeply and to increase in faith, hope, and love. However, the enemy can also speak the language of God. Thus, Ignatius distinguishes two forms of language—those of true love and false love—with contrasting purposes.

### 2.2.1 *True consolation*

The first comes from God and its features are to lead people to God by imparting to them true happiness and spiritual joy. The authentic form of consolation encourages the soul and dismisses all the sadness and distress caused by the enemy (Rules 1 and 3). Related to the authentic form of consolation, Ignatius indicates that there are two forms of spiritual consolation: consolation *with* cause and *without* cause, and only God can give the latter consolations.

Regarding the difference between the two kinds of consolation (Rules 2 and 3), Ivens explains that consolation with cause is “a proportionate effect of considering,

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<sup>62</sup> Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, 226.

contemplating or reacting to an ‘object’ (e.g., an idea, a text, an image, a memory, a Gospel incident),” whereas consolation without cause “does not depend on such an object and activity. It is gratuitous and impossible to induce.”<sup>63</sup> So, any form of consolation which comes from or depends on the activities of meditation or contemplation, or any prior experience, is consolation with cause.<sup>64</sup>

### 2.2.2. *False consolation*

The bad angel appears as an angel of light, imitating the work of the good spirit, giving certain consolations to the soul for his own perverted purposes [Rules 4 to 6]. Ignatius emphasizes this point to those who are making good progress toward God so that they remain vigilant at all times. He points out the tactics of deception in consolation in order to prevent dedicated persons from falling into the trap of the enemy, who seeks to enter the devotee’s soul in a surreptitious manner, and “to leave with his own profit” [Rule 4]. Ignatius states that from the beginning, the enemy evokes “good and holy thoughts” in order to adapt to the soul of the devout person. Then, “little by little,” the enemy endeavors to mislead devotees far away from the leading of the Holy Spirit, guiding them instead to his way by “bringing the soul to his hidden deceits and perverse intentions.”<sup>65</sup>

### 2.2.3. *Way to confront the enemy’s tactics*

To confront the enemy’s strategy, in Rules 5 to 7, Ignatius advises that devotees must pay close attention to the process of their thoughts and to carefully distinguish the

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<sup>63</sup> Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual exercises*, 230.

<sup>64</sup> Toner, *Discernment of Spirits*, 219.

<sup>65</sup> Timothy M. Gallagher, *Spiritual Consolation: An Ignatian Guide for Greater Discernment of Spirits* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2007), 1234 of 3217. Kindle.

features of the good spirit and the enemy. The first feature concerns the syntax of God's language, that of consistency, from the beginning, to the middle, and the end of the thoughts, which is crucial in order to recognize the works of the spirits. Ignatius states that "if the beginning, middle and the end are entirely good and tend towards what is wholly right, this is a sign of the good angel" [*SpEx*, 333]. Thus, devoted persons need to consider in greater detail not only the starting point of the thought, but the entire process. They should regularly examine whether their thoughts remain holy and good throughout or tend to devolve "little by little" into the lesser good. In this case, devotees begin to feel exhausted and neglect meditation and contemplation. This indicates that their souls are weakened. The former is the work of the good spirit because devotees will grow in the love of God; the latter is from the evil spirit and its consequences cause them harm. The holy thought from the beginning is bent and distorted. The good intentions are no longer consistent and therefore the devotee feels tiredness, sadness, and discouragement, giving up commitment and dedication to serving God and God's people.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, in this case, the enemy has entered the devoted soul through one door and left by its own way.

Ignatius had this kind of experience in Barcelona during his time of language study. When he needed to memorize things in order to advance in Latin, he began to receive in great abundance new spiritual insights, which brought him "new enjoyments." This happened with such force that "he could not learn by heart, nor could get rid of the insights however much he resisted them." Reflecting on this experience, he realized that "not even when I set myself to prayer and when I am at mass do these insights which are so vivid come to me." Little by little, he recognized it was a temptation. Ignatius's

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<sup>66</sup> Toner, *Discernment of Spirits*, 224.

experience can happen to all devotees [*Autobiog*, 54]. Thus, he reminds them to be careful with their thoughts because the evil spirit can appear as an angel of light from the starting-point.

Second, faithful persons in spiritual life must devote much attention not only to the consistency of thoughts but also examine the dynamic of their intentions [Rule 6]. Thanks to frequent reflection upon what happened within him, Ignatius came to know the tactics of the enemy and how to resist them. Finally, devotees should be sensitive to concrete signs of the way the spirits touch their souls. For those who are growing in the spiritual life and seeking deep intimacy with God, the good spirit touches them “gently, lightly, and sweetly, like a drop of water going into a sponge,” whereas the evil spirit touches them “sharply with noise and disturbance, as when a drop of water falls on a stone” [Rule 7]. In this rule, Ignatius continues to discuss the actions of the spirits in terms of the orientation of dedicated persons. Gallagher explains that for the people who are proceeding spiritually from good to better, the spirit of God will console them, assist them, and give them the true happiness and inner peace.<sup>67</sup> In this case, that the disposition of maturing Christians—who make “serious progress in the purification of their sins, and who advance from good to better in the service of God our Lord” [*SpEx*, 315]—and the disposition of the good spirit, are moving in the same direction.<sup>68</sup> In other words, the will of these persons is in accordance with the Holy Spirit. Thus, they can experience the

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<sup>67</sup> Gallagher, *Spiritual Consolation*, 1807 of 3217. Kindle.

<sup>68</sup> Toner, *Discernment of Spirits*, 239.

action of the Holy Spirit helping them to move “along easily, delightfully, peacefully, even increasing [their] velocity toward [their] goal.”<sup>69</sup>

However, Toner reminds devotees to keep in mind several important qualifications in the spiritual battle of the spirits. First, the good spirit may cause the initial disturbance, but afterward, it brings interior peace. Second, the peace “may be mingled with pain, fear, and the like, when the inspiration calls one to endurance of pain and to daring.”<sup>70</sup> Third, there are several dimensions which continue to exist within a devoted person that are still not set on God. Thus, the good spirit may sharply touch them in order to remind them of the need for conversion.

### 3. Summary and Reflections

God is constantly laboring in the world, inviting humans to collaborate with God to continue the work of creation and the plan of salvation. The way Jesus chose, called, and taught his disciples shows us that God speaks to each individual in a unique way, revealing the divine will to each according to his/her ability. In order for humans to understand God’s will, the Holy Spirit is sent to enlighten, guide, and help them respond to God’s call, to undergo *metanoia*, and to fulfill their ultimate purpose. In the two previous segments, I examined the spiritual journey of Ignatius of Loyola with regard to his interaction with God and his search for God’s will. In this part, I summarize the material and offer my reflections upon what I have discovered so far.

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<sup>69</sup> Toner, *Discernment of Spirits*, 239.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

The first point concerns the understanding of the relationship with God in discerning God's will. Throughout Ignatius's writings,<sup>71</sup> the relationship with God is personal—one-on-one.<sup>72</sup> He counsels the director to allow the Creator to deal directly with the creature. Thus, God always loves humans and communicates with them, inviting all people to open their hearts and their minds to receive the Holy Spirit and to cooperate with God's grace in order to recognize and understand the will of God. In response, humans need to make an effort to seek God's will by listening to God's voice through the Holy Spirit working within their souls, and responding to God accordingly. Thus, the God-human relationship is one of "dependence and collaboration."<sup>73</sup> Once humans perceive the love of God and desire to move towards God in spiritual life, they need to convert their lives in order to tune their will with God's will.

Second, regarding the conversion process, Ignatius's failure in Pamplona was a turning point for conversion, in which God spoke to him through the process of pausing, reflecting, and paying attention to the direction where these movements were taking him. With the grace of God, Ignatius worked intently with his inner motions: perceiving them, then examining them closely in order to understand of their origin and their direction. Here it is important to recall two key insights. The first concerns the creation of space – disposing oneself to God in order to detect the language of God through one's inner movements. Second, conversion is not just a one-time event in the spiritual life, but a messy and ongoing process with its tensions and dynamic movements: from self-

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<sup>71</sup> See Annotation 15.

<sup>72</sup> Jules J. Toner, *What Is Your Will, O God? A Casebook for Studying Discernment of God's Will* (Saint Louis, MO: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995), 6.

<sup>73</sup> Toner, *What Is Your Will, O God*, 6.

centeredness to God-centeredness, from self-determination to discipleship, from sympathy to compassion, and from living in faith to living in realized hope.<sup>74</sup> Thus, orienting one's life is a long process in which the individual is ever making new space for God to speak and the individual to listen. The spiritual life involves, to the best of one's ability, paying attention and listening to what God is working and calling, even in the midst of failures or struggles. This means that God speaks through everything. In our lives, we have known successes and failures. The way we handle the difficult moments and draw the good from the uncertain things that have happened, is extremely important. Thus, if we are open to the Holy Spirit, any incident in our lives might become a starting-point for deeper conversion, leading us to God.

Third, from personal experiences related to the relationship with God and the working of the spirits within the soul, Ignatius synthesized and formally codified his spiritual experiences. These became the *Spiritual Exercises*, foundational steps to assist those who desire to detect and learn God's language. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius wrote two sets of rules for discernment of spirits in order help exercitants in the journey of seeking God's will.

Keenly aware of the importance of the interior movements in spiritual growth and in discernment of spirits, Ignatius paid close attention to the diverse motions within the soul such as true happiness, devotion, inner peace, sadness, disturbance, dryness, darkness and so on. He named these emotions spiritual consolation or desolation. In order to recognize the work of the spirits, to deal with the struggles, and to keep moving

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<sup>74</sup> Fleming, *Contemporary Annotations*, 72–85.

forward to God, Ignatius advocates consistency in prayer, meditation, contemplation, and self-examination in daily life.

Finally, from Ignatius's experience with regard to his intention to follow in Jesus' footsteps to Jerusalem to serve God there, we learn that although this desire is good in itself, it is ultimately not God's will for Ignatius' life. Thus, God's will for one's life does not necessarily lie in the things that immediately or logically appear as the highest good—for instance, the choice of religious life over married life. The important thing is that the individual must collaborate with God's grace to discern the unique way in which God is calling him or her.

### **Conclusion**

Encountering Ignatius's life through his *Personal Writings* helps us to understand the uniquely personal way in which God communicates with each believer. God always takes the initiative in interaction with believers, evoking the desire for God in their hearts. The Holy Spirit continues working within their souls, enlightening them to understand God's plan for them. Out of their own human freedom, believers will ultimately choose whether or not to open their hearts and minds to the Holy Spirit and to respond God's call. Concerning the work of the spirits, believers must attend carefully to the inner movements of the soul because these motions are the locus of the revelation of God's will for one's life. Therefore, the rules of discernment will become a powerful tool to assist believers in distinguishing the movements of the spirits within their souls so that they can mature in their relationship with God. Collaborating with God's grace, they will seek to do everything for the greater glory of God.

## **CHAPTER 3: SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF GOD:**

### **Guidelines for both Candidates and Spiritual Directors in the Decision-Making Process**

#### **Introduction**

Through our exploration of the God/human relationship in Scripture and Church tradition, we have learned that God does not have a fixed or pre-determined plan for individuals, nor does God act like someone who plays a game of “hide and seek,” in which humans simply make an effort to identify and follow that plan. Rather, God is a God who continues to labor within creation and invites humans to collaborate with God in this ongoing process. Throughout the rich history of the People of God, God reveals God’s will to humans in various contexts. In every situation, the mutual relationship between God and humans is crucial. It is first and foremost within the context of personal relationship with God that humans are able to hear God’s voice and recognize God’s will.

The brief survey of the Scriptures and the lives of several great spiritual figures indicates that the notion of the “will of God” is understood as God’s dynamic and evolving plan. In the unfolding of this plan, humans, in the power with which God endows them, actively collaborate with God’s grace in order to shape their future, collectively and as individuals. Thus, God’s plan is collaborative in nature in such a way that God continues to invite and to draw people into the divine labor to “save the human race” [*SpEx* 102]. Consequently, human beings respond by learning to listen to how the divine invitation is communicated, and thus the need to learn a new language—the language of God. Ignatius of Loyola, through his life experience and journey, learned and developed one of the ways to detect God’s communication to him.

Moving from theory to practice, this chapter develops a set of guidelines, or a pastoral plan, which integrates the knowledge and insights from the previous two chapters in the context of religious life in Vietnam. These guidelines are designed for young women who are discerning their life direction and vocation. More specifically, exploring the wisdom found in several of the Annotations of the *Spiritual Exercises*, these guidelines emphasize active listening to the inner movements taking place in both the candidate and the director. Such listening helps both parties with individual prayer, ongoing spiritual direction, and spiritual practice. Then, it assists them in creating a better space for the “Creator to work directly with the creature, and the creature with the Creator and Lord” [Annotation 15]. The chapter includes two main parts: (1) the historical and religious context of Vietnam, and (2) guidelines to practice a language of God that will assist and empower the young women in their discernment process. Here I will consider how the capacity to detect the language of God within one’s own situation might unfold within the specific context of Vietnamese religious life.

### **1. The Importance of Knowing the Social and Cultural Background**

The *Spiritual Exercises* begins with the twenty Annotations. Ignatius states that the Annotations aim to provide “assistance both to the person giving the exercises and to the person who is to receive them” [ *SpEx* 1]. According to David Fleming, the Annotations provide essential guidelines for the giving of the retreat. The Annotations become a powerful tool “for the good progress of the retreat.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David F. Fleming, ed., *Notes on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, The Best of the Review 1 (St. Louis, MO: Review for Religious, 1996), 4.

In the seventeenth Annotation, Ignatius presents useful information with regard to the importance of knowing the exercitant in order to accompany him/her in the Spiritual Exercises. Therefore, it is necessary to understand Vietnamese candidates in their historical, cultural, and religious background, as these factors play a central role in their worldview and lives, and thus in their decision-making process.

My order, the *Congregation of Notre Dame*, has thirty candidates every year— young Vietnamese women from the age of eighteen to twenty-nine—seeking to discern their vocations to the consecrated life. They are mainly university students who come from different parts of the country. Some of them have graduated from university and have been working in companies or in schools. They all seek the will of God for their lives and wish to discern their vocations.

### ***1.1. The Historical and Religious Context of the Vietnamese Candidates***

Religion is the core of Vietnamese philosophy and social behavior. Because of its favorable geographical position and historical background, Vietnam was not only a rich land for trading but also a fertile soil for many religions such as ancestor veneration, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity, and others. In Vietnam, ancestor veneration is the most popular “religion.” Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism were introduced into Vietnam around the second century BCE by Indian and Chinese traders and were gradually integrated with one another and with other Vietnamese native religious features. Together they came to be “the Unity of the Three Teachings” or the Triple Religion (three convergent coexisting religions). This triple religion has shaped the Vietnamese religious worldview, which has influenced the life all Vietnamese people in various ways. Thus, numerous Vietnamese accepted these religions as a core element of

life. Christianity was first introduced into Vietnam in 1533 by the European Catholic Missionaries. The mission work developed rapidly and began to expand.

Confucianism still affects the daily lives of most Vietnamese people at a deep level. Filial piety—one of the main values of Confucianism, is considered the foundation of a life of virtue in the Vietnamese family. As it became the “focal point of family rituals and activities, it . . . also created the structural unity of the Vietnamese family in the process.”<sup>2</sup> For this reason, Vietnamese culture places a high value on the knowledge and authority of parents or religious leaders. Children therefore have the tendency to obey them and ignore their own subjectivity in seeking their life vocation. This poses significant obstacles to the discernment of God’s call in their lives.

### ***1.2. The Socio-cultural Context of Vietnam***

Today, Vietnam is a developing country, in which the economy is rapidly growing. There are more and more foreign companies eager to invest in Vietnam. The living standards of people have improved significantly. Economically, Vietnam has the potential for further development. However, there are many problems related to the social and cultural dimensions of the society. According to Son Nguyen, former secretary of the Vietnamese Conference of Catholic Bishops, the phenomenon of secularization is dramatically increasing. The younger generation in Vietnam is influenced by ideological materialism and atheism, and largely excludes God from life.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Paul H. Vu, “The Spirituality of Living in Betwixt: Lessons for Vietnamese Americans from the Ministry of Alexandre de Rhodes, S.J.” (Licentiate in Sacred Theology thesis., Jesuit School of Santa Clara University, 2012). 46.

<sup>3</sup> Nguyen, “Truyen Giao Viet Nam Trong 50 Nam qua,” (Evangelization in Vietnam in the past 50 years).

Morality and ethics are in a state of decline, as evidenced by increasing violence (in schools and society), rising crime rates, rampant sexual activity among young teens, and escalating rates of divorce and abortion.<sup>4</sup> In addition, a radical decrease in food and water safety regulations, a phenomenon known in Vietnam as “dirty food,” has become a significant problem.<sup>5</sup>

The system of values is greatly disordered. According to Tuong Nguyen,<sup>6</sup> professor of the Academy of Journalism and Communication in Vietnam, some traditional values such as authentic-lifestyle, honesty, fairness, integrity in social relations, and a spirit of protecting and building the country are decreasing. Meanwhile, a selfish, pragmatic, and violent lifestyle has taken root in society. Many adolescents have a lifestyle characterized by inhumane actions such as rape, robbery of their own parents to acquire money for drugs, or assault on school teachers.<sup>7</sup> The situation of organized

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<sup>4</sup> Huong Thu Vu, “Báo Động Tình Trạng trẻ quan hệ tình dục từ 12 tuổi,” (Alert: Sexual Activity of Children from 12 years old), accessed October 20, 2017, <https://news.zing.vn/bao-dong-tinh-trang-tre-quan-he-tinh-duc-tu-12-tuoi-post489738.html>. The statistics for the first six months of 2014 of the National Hospital of Obstetrics and Gynecology (NHOG) shows that “there were around 5,000 cases of abortion, of which adolescents accounted for a large number. The number of adolescents ages twelve to fourteen who have had abortions has increased. Translation from the Vietnamese to English is mine. For example. In 2014, Vietnam was among the top five countries in the world with the highest abortion rates. “Vietnam Ranks First in Asia in Abortion, among World’s Top 5,” accessed April 29, 2016, <http://tuoitrenews.vn/society/19787/vietnam-ranks-first-in-asia-in-abortion>.

<sup>5</sup> According to Vietnamnet, “there are also stories of rice soaked in pesticides, huge amounts of antibiotic residue found in shrimp, fish and pork, chicken meat painted with varnish and beef pumped full of water to gain weight. Thanks to its dirty food, dirty water and air, in another five years Vietnam will probably see a cancer epidemic because now over 100,000 are already diagnosed with this illness each year.” accessed November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017, <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/society/154682/it-is-vietnamese-killing-each-other.html>

<sup>6</sup> Tuong Nguyen, “Một Số Biểu Hiện Của Sự Biến Đổi Giá Trị Đạo Đức Trong Nền Kinh Tế Thị Trường Ở Việt Nam Hiện Nay và Giải Pháp Khắc Phục” (Some Signals of the Transformation of Moral Values in Economic Market in Vietnam and the Resolutions) *ChúngTa.com*, last modified November 8, 2010, accessed December 5, 2016, [http://www.chungta.com/nd/tu-lieu-tra-cuu/su\\_bien\\_doi\\_cua\\_gia\\_tri\\_dao\\_duc-f.html](http://www.chungta.com/nd/tu-lieu-tra-cuu/su_bien_doi_cua_gia_tri_dao_duc-f.html). Translation from the Vietnamese to English is mine.

<sup>7</sup> Duong Vu, “Vụ 5 học sinh hiếp dâm cô giáo: Luân chuyển trường theo nguyện vọng cô giáo,” (The case of 5 students raped the school teacher: Transfer school according to her wish). According to Congan News Online, “on the night of December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015, an elementary school teacher who was

crime in Vietnam is much more serious and complex than before, involving dangerous crimes such as individual terrorism, extortion, trafficking of women and children for labor and sexual exploitation, large-scale trafficking of explosives and narcotics, contract killing organizations, and so on. In families, parents are not paying attention to educating their children properly. Family relationships are greatly impacted because of money: children assault their parents, brothers betray each other, and couples separate or divorce.

Another problematic social phenomenon is that of migration within the country: more than eight million people are forced to move to the cities or other places for study or work.<sup>8</sup> At times this involves an individual who must leave his family, or, whole families who relocate to the urban centers. Although in the village, people are more grounded and settled, a move to the city often provides greater educational and employment opportunities. At the same time, immigrants to the cities face challenges to their traditional morality and their own identities; for instance, the phenomenon of cohabitation. Further, the influence of westernized and East-Asian cultures in the large cities on the newly arrived youth from the villages impacts lifestyle choices and behavior. Many of them think that it is not worth making life-long commitments and thus choose to simply live for the moment. In this context, Vietnam has become more mobile, a phenomenon that is both positive in terms of diversity and new cultural flavor, and negative in terms of challenges to traditional lifestyles and values. Therefore, this socio-

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preparing her lesson was subdued and raped by five students. Even though the victim cried and begged, the students raped and left her.” Three of them were 15 years-old, and the other two were 16 years old. They were in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade at Loong Luong Secondary School, at Suoi Bon. Accessed November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017, [http://congan.com.vn/vu-an/vu-5-hoc-sinh-hiep-dam-co-giao-luan-chuyen-truong-theo-nguyen-vong-co-giao\\_13009.html](http://congan.com.vn/vu-an/vu-5-hoc-sinh-hiep-dam-co-giao-luan-chuyen-truong-theo-nguyen-vong-co-giao_13009.html). Translation from the Vietnamese to English is mine.

<sup>8</sup> Nguyen, “Truyen Giao Viet Nam Trong 50 Nam qua” (Evangelization in Vietnam in the past 50 years).

cultural moment in Vietnam can potentially be an opportune time to discern one's life direction or vocation.

As a spiritual director of young candidates for religious life, I have learned by listening to their stories that it is extremely difficult for the candidates to listen to God's call within the context of Vietnam today. How can they hear God's voice if they are affected by the external noise of the society or the imposed desires of their parents and religious leaders? This is a challenge in the Vietnamese context given the socio-economic and cultural factors noted above.

Trung Vu, president of inter-congregational life in the archdiocese of Saigon, remarks that the candidates are impacted by the diverse motions of conscience and consciousness. On the one hand, they are motivated to consecrated life by the legitimate desires to serve God's people, and to achieve sainthood, or to be with Jesus through prayer. Some of them want to imitate holy men and women. They live their consecrated life and become witnesses to Jesus' love by devoting themselves to serving God and God's people, particularly the poorest and the suffering. A great number of Catholic religious sisters serve humbly in many centers for the orphaned and handicapped. With the compassion of a mother or a sister, they take care of the suffering, the children in orphanages, and the patients in the leprosarium. As religious sisters, they serve the poor and the suffering with the joy and the devotion with which they serve Jesus. Three years ago, I led a group of students on a visit to the vocational training center for children from 5 to 21 years old run by the Sisters of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary in Ho Chi Minh City. As they witnessed the sisters taking care of the children with dedication and

love, my students were in great admiration of this work and the manner of serving people. Later, three of them joined the religious community to pursue consecrated life.

On the other hand, some of them are motivated to consecrated life by disordered desires which are not in accord with the Gospels. In some cases, candidates seek to compensate for some deep deprivation of childhood. Thus, religious life becomes a means for meeting these basic needs. In other cases, the candidate may seek an escape from an adverse socio-economic situation<sup>9</sup> or from married life due to childhood sexual abuse.

Furthermore, many young people are passive in terms of thinking and reflecting. Professor of Mathematics Văn Như Cương, who gave a talk to students at the 2017 opening ceremony of the new school year of Lương Thế Vinh High School, states that a large number of Vietnamese students are extremely lazy in terms of critical thinking.<sup>10</sup> The technological culture encourages young people to spend insufficient time reflecting critically upon what it is happening in their lives and in the larger society, and fosters over-reliance on various forms of social media. Candidates for religious life are not impervious to the effects of this culture on their spiritual life and decision-making process.

This context also presents a challenge to directors in accompanying the candidates in their spiritual journey. Therefore, becoming familiar with God's language and

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<sup>9</sup> Trung Vu, "Nhận định on gọi tu trì" (Comment on religious vocation), accessed October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017, <https://dongten.net/2013/04/16/nhan-dinh-on-goi-tu-tri/22469>. Translation from the Vietnamese to English is mine.

<sup>10</sup> "Professor Văn Như Cương, Opening ceremony address: diagnosis of the 'laziness' of students," accessed October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017, <http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/giao-duc/nguoi-thay/pgs-van-nhu-cuong-chan-doan-benh-luoi-cua-hoc-sinh-trong-ngay-khai-giang-396921.html>, Translation from the Vietnamese to English is mine.

practicing the language of God, wherein the candidate learns to analyze her interior movements in order to discern God's will, becomes the crucial task for both candidates and directors in the specific context of Vietnam today.

## **2. Practicing the Language of God**

Self-knowledge is crucial in the process of practicing the language of God. Augustine of Hippo prayed: O Lord, let me know myself; let me know you.<sup>11</sup> John Calvin also addresses the importance of self-knowledge. He states that "self-knowledge is directly linked to knowledge of God."<sup>12</sup> Though difficult to accomplish, knowing and caring for ourselves, and achieving our own eternal happiness, are some of the most important duties to which we are called in this life.<sup>13</sup> Augustine was convinced that "no venture was more important than reflection on his own destiny."<sup>14</sup> According to Philip L. Boroughs, sufficient knowledge of self is one of the predispositions necessary to the discernment of God's will.<sup>15</sup> According to Ignatius, self-awareness, which he speaks of in terms of sensitivity to one's own inner movements, is the gateway to detecting the language of God. Therefore, this part suggests several concrete guidelines to assist both candidates and directors in the process of self-awareness and sound decision-making. It includes two important components. The first concerns the qualities required of the

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<sup>11</sup> Henry Chadwick, trans., *Saint Augustine: Confessions*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Book X.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Liebert, *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision-making* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 23.

<sup>13</sup> Donald X. Burt, "*Let Me Know Myself*": *Reflections on the Prayer of Augustine* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), vii.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Philip L. Boroughs, "Using Ignatian Discernment," in David L. Fleming, ed., *Contemporary Annotations: Ignatian Exercises*, The Best of the Review 4 (St. Louis, MO: Review for Religious, 1996), 288.

spiritual director and the candidate, and the nature of the relationship between the two, with regard to practicing the language of God. The second addresses the means, such as active listening, the inner movements, individual prayers, and so on, that will help both candidate and director in engaging in the conversation with God.

### **2.1. Requisite Qualities of the Spiritual Director and the Candidate and their Respective Roles in Practicing the Language of God**

In the process of learning a language, both teacher and student have their own roles and responsibilities. Good teachers give direction and provide appropriate learning resources for students. Though they cannot learn for the students, they can guide and challenge them to improve their language skills. With all the good resources at their disposal, students must be wise in choosing how to use all these materials to their benefit. Likewise, with regard to the process of practicing the language of God, both spiritual director and candidate must be aware of their respective roles so that the learning process can be fruitful. The twenty Annotations found in the *Spiritual Exercises* contain important insights into the *Exercises* and provide instructions to “both to the person giving them and to the person who is to receive them” [*SpEx* 1]. The first Annotation concerns the purpose of the *Exercises*. From the outset, Ignatius states clearly that the aim of the *Spiritual Exercises* is to prepare and dispose “one’s soul to rid herself of all disordered attachments, so that once rid of them one might seek and find the divine will in regard to the disposition of one’s life for the good of the soul” [*SpEx* 1]. In the following segment, I will examine the qualities required of both the director and candidate based on the Annotations.

***2.1.1. Qualities required of the director: the role and position of directors in candidates' process of practicing the language of God***

First, the spiritual director must attentively listen to what the candidate has recounted so that she can give brief feedback and avoid being wordy. Attentive listening is one of the essential factors of interpersonal communication. The director must fully pay attention to the candidate and concentrate on what is being conveyed. Thus, the director not only hears what the candidate *says*, and captures the surface meaning of her words, but observes the non-verbal expressions of the candidate through her gestures, moods, facial expressions, and so forth. This helps the director to understand what is going on beneath the candidate's spoken words. In other words, the director must attentively listen with both head and heart so that she can understand the deep movements within the candidate [Annotation 3].

In addition, the director will narrate "a faithful account of the events to be meditated or contemplated" [Annotation 2]. Concerning this point, Ignatius states that the soul can be filled and satisfied by "the inner feeling and relish of things" rather than by "much knowledge" imparted by the director [Annotation 2]. Thus, the director must be aware of "not over explaining or reflecting too much on the texts and passages that accompany the Exercises."<sup>16</sup>

Attentive listening helps the director to meet the candidate where she is in order to adapt the exercises. Regarding this point, Herbert F. Smith also indicates that a director should feed the input in "harmony with the retreatant's actual accomplishments," and

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<sup>16</sup> Hermann Rodriguez Osorio, "Spiritual Accompaniment During the Spiritual Exercises According to St. Ignatius of Loyola." In *Review of Ignatian Spirituality*. XXXVI, I/2005, 79.

then, he/she can moderate “the flow of the retreat in a fully personalized way.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, a director should keep in mind that “the graces sought in each meditation are necessary graces which have to be built up in their proper order like parts of a building.”<sup>18</sup> This control of the process of becoming familiar with God’s voice is one of the benefits of the guided retreat.

Second, in the spiritual journey of the candidate, the spiritual director acts as a wise companion. She attentively engages in the spiritual growth of the candidate. She must be aware that if the candidate does not experience any spiritual movements such as consolation or desolation, she must question and carefully examine a directee as to whether she has been making the exercises properly and at the appointed time [Annotation 6]. Moreover, when the candidate is in a period of desolation and temptation, a director should not treat her harshly and curtly but gently and kindly, as Jesus would treat her at that moment. A director should encourage and strengthen the candidate for the future by unmasking the strategies of the enemy and assisting the exercitant to prepare for the consolation which will come [Annotation 7]. In contrast, if the retreatant is in a period of consolation and great fervor, a good director will caution the retreatant against making any promises or vows which are not being considered carefully.<sup>19</sup> In this regard, the director must consider the capacities and temperament of the retreatant, considering

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<sup>17</sup> Herbert F. Smith, “The nature and value of a directed retreat” in David L. Fleming, ed., *Notes on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, The Best of the Review 1 (St. Louis, MO: Review for Religious, 1996), 23.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Paul J. Bernadicou, “The Retreat Director in the *Spiritual Exercises*,” in David L. Fleming, ed., *Notes on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, The Best of the Review 1 (St. Louis, MO: Review for Religious, 1996), 28-9.

whether or not that person can fulfill the promises that she desires to make [Annotation 14]. Thus, a director should be aware that “the more unstable the retreatant is the more vigilant the director needs to be.”<sup>20</sup>

Third, the spiritual director plays the role of facilitator in the decision-making process of the candidate. In order to do so, she must maintain a posture of equilibrium, without seeking to influence the directee (whether consciously or unconsciously) to make any promise or important decision. Ignatius advises that during doing the Spiritual Exercises, the director “must not encourage the exercitant more towards poverty or to the promise of it rather than to the contrary, nor to one state or way of life than to another” [Annotation 15]. The director must leave “the Creator to deal with the creature, and the creature with the Creator and Lord.” In other words, God communicates Godself to a devout person, “inflaming that soul in his love and praise, and disposing her towards the way in which she will be better able to serve him in the future.” Therefore, the director should not “be swayed or show a preference for one side of a choice rather than the other, but remaining in the centre like the pointer of a balance” [Annotation 15].

Smith also makes clear that in the discernment process, only the candidate herself can be present to her own interior experiences. Thus, the candidate is always the primary discerner, and when she “is guided by the Holy Spirit to come to a certain decision, the director can hope to be guided by Him to confirm the decision.”<sup>21</sup> In this way, the director should be aware that s/he is the auxiliary discerner who can help the retreatant

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<sup>20</sup> Tien M. Nam, “Ignatian Spiritual Direction in the Vietnamese Context,” Licentiate in Sacred Theology (S.T.L.) thesis, Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, Berkeley, CA, 2007, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, “The Nature and Value of a Directed Retreat,” 23.

“to discern the mysteries of the interior life in a practical way,” and interprets “the experiences of the retreatant in accord with the Biblical and doctrinal expressions of revelation as it is guarded and developed and handed on by the whole Church.”<sup>22</sup>

In order to effectively accompany the candidate in the spiritual journey, the director should be faithfully informed by the candidate of the variety of inner movements and thoughts caused by the different spirits so that she can adapt the Exercises to the candidate’s specific needs [Annotation 17]. In other words, the director should be expected “to have a good knowledge of the exercitant—their personality, temperament, tendencies, strengths and weaknesses, etc.”<sup>23</sup> The purpose of the adaptation is to attain “the ultimate end of the entire Exercises” and thus, to allow the exercitant to be led to “individual spiritual maturity at his own true pace under the personal guidance of the Spirit.”<sup>24</sup>

In brief, the spiritual director plays an important role in the process of decision making within the context of the Exercises. S/he takes part as an assistant in terms of helping the candidate to interpret her inner movements, while staying out of God’s way so that God can communicate directly with the retreatant or candidate. By her/his knowledge and understanding of the ways of God, the director can assist the retreatant “in the important time in his spiritual development; in a time of struggle and crisis, in a moment of grace.”<sup>25</sup> The director can play the role of facilitator, appearing at the right

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<sup>22</sup> Smith, “The Nature and Value of a Directed Retreat,” 23.

<sup>23</sup> Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises* (Gracewing, 2008), 17.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Bernadicou, “The Retreat Director in the *Spiritual Exercises*,” 37.

moment to give necessary assistance to the exercitant, or staying behind the scenes to let the retreatant communicate directly with God. Paul C. Bernadicou states that “the director has the privilege of being an instrument in this new work of God’s gracious love by fulfilling his role as advocate and interpreter” in the service of Christ in the Church.<sup>26</sup> Thus, it is extremely important for the director to be aware of her/his position and role in the retreatant’s process of practicing the language of God so that the retreatant may benefit from the Exercises in order to be able to communicate with God.

Besides the roles discussed so far, the director should possess certain qualities which are helpful in guiding or accompanying the directee. The first quality is self-awareness. According to George P. Leach, the director must be aware of her/his own feelings, thoughts, and ways of acting in the encounter with the directee, “so that he is *not re-acting to* the person but *acting for* the person.”<sup>27</sup> The second quality is self-knowledge. By coming to self-awareness, personal integration, and “wholeness in Christ,” the director will attain “a new freedom in the Spirit which enables him to direct others more freely towards the Father.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, the director must grow in the awareness of the variety of motions within herself/himself. This is an essential requirement in directing others. Though in reality, the director may have certain disorders, s/he must be aware of these things and not let them be hindrances to the other.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Bernadicou, “The Retreat Director in the *Spiritual Exercises*,” 38.

<sup>27</sup> George P. Leach, “Growing Freedom in the Spiritual Director,” in David L. Fleming, ed., *Notes on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, 40.

<sup>28</sup> Leach, “Growing Freedom in the Spiritual Director,” 42.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

Third, the director must be strong in faith and in prayer.<sup>30</sup> These qualities are extremely necessary in the life of the director. With God's grace, the director may realize just how weak her faith really is. However, she trusts in the Trinity and prays for her faith to be strengthened so that she may be ready to serve those who are sent to her. Only in developing a deep intimacy with Jesus through prayer will the director be adequately equipped to guide the other. How can she effectively direct the candidate in moving towards God if she herself is not led by the Holy Spirit in prayer? Leach explains that prayer "calls forth faith as the director guides the person in his personal discernment."<sup>31</sup> Indeed, prayer must be central to the process of accompanying the candidate. The director should pray for the directee between sessions and before each meeting. Thus, "the session is conducted in an atmosphere of prayer."<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the director must have suitable theological grounding.<sup>33</sup> Just as assisting a student in the process of learning a language requires that the teacher have sufficient knowledge of the rules of grammar, in the spiritual journey, the director should be devoted to the study of Scripture and possess basic knowledge of dogma and morality, which are the foundations of Christian life.

In short, the spiritual director is not a perfect person, and must therefore continue to cultivate self-transparency, humility, and theological acumen. She should be a person of prayer and remain open to the Holy Spirit, who guides her in every daily decision. The

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<sup>30</sup> Leach, "Growing Freedom in the Spiritual Director," 43-6.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>32</sup> Sue Pickering, *Spiritual Direction: A Practical Introduction* (Hymns Ancient and Modern Ltd, 2008), 17.

<sup>33</sup> Leach, "Growing Freedom in the Spiritual Director," 45.

director is a person who does not cease to pray, to live simply, obey freely, and love chastely in order to become a living sign for the other.<sup>34</sup>

***2.1.2. Qualities required of the candidates: Role and position of the candidates in the process of practicing the language of God***

In order to maximize the benefits of the discernment process, and to learn to practice the language of God, the candidate needs to be conscious of her own agency so that she does not rely solely on the director but actively seeks God's will for her life. The candidate must be aware that s/he has the primary responsibility for self-development in the spiritual journey, for practicing the language of God.<sup>35</sup> The director is merely a guide who steers her in the right direction. Thus, the exercitant should obey the director in terms of following her insight and wisdom, and reflect upon these things, but should not depend overmuch on the director.

The primary qualities required of the candidate are courage and generosity. The candidate should be courageous and humble, willing to dialogue with and listen to the director, who assists her in the spiritual journey. Just as a student who wants to master a language must spend time practicing that language, learning a new vocabulary and syntax, a candidate who desires to communicate with God must study attentively the language of God. From his own experiences, Ignatius advises the exercitant that she must faithfully pray and spend adequate time on each given point in order to resist the temptation of the enemy or even to defeat him completely [Annotation 12-13]. In other words, the candidate must be self-disciplined and faithful in her spiritual practices.

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<sup>34</sup> Leach, "Growing Freedom in the Spiritual Director," 46.

<sup>35</sup> Smith, "The Nature and Value of a Directed Retreat," 22–3.

The candidate must be transparent with her director in terms of informing the director of “various agitations and thoughts brought about by the different spirits” so that the director has the necessary information to explain to the candidate the nature of the inner movements and to adapt the exercises accordingly [Annotation 17]. This point is extremely significant in the candidate’s spiritual journey. By being open with the director, the exercitant will profit greatly and make progress in the spiritual life. In other words, the exercitant needs to be honest with herself, with God, and with the director, who assists her in the discernment process. Without honesty and attentive listening to what is being said (on the part of both parties), the discernment process does not unfold as God desires. By being courageous and generous, the candidate creates more space for God in her soul and gradually moves toward God.

From what we have discussed so far, we can see that the relationship between the spiritual director and the directee is a one-to-one relationship of mutual trust. Both the exercitant and the director are responsible for building that relationship. The exercitant respects, trusts in, and is honest with the director. At the same time, the director should observe appropriate behavior such as listening attentively to the exercitant, questioning, caring deeply, and showing real concern.<sup>36</sup> Gradually, as the mutual trust grows, the director can guide the exercitant to order her life and to move towards God. Most important, the relationship between the director and the directee must be in “the service of an immediate encounter with God—'of seeking and finding God’s will in the ordering of our life for the salvation of our soul’.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, the director/directee

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<sup>36</sup> Leach, “Growing Freedom in the Spiritual Director,” 41.

<sup>37</sup> Osorio, “Spiritual Accompaniment during the *Spiritual Exercises* According to St. Ignatius of Loyola,” 89.

relationship should reflect the relationship between God and individual. In maintaining the delicate balance between compassion for and challenge to the directee, there must also remain total freedom. Benjamin Gonzalez Buelta expresses this beautifully in a poem about the relationship between God and the individual:

You are the God of perfect proximity,  
of the necessary sacrament that allows us to grow  
without too much cold and night  
so that our clay remains raw  
and without so much fire  
from sun and noontime  
that would burn us.”<sup>38</sup>

## **2.2. Engaging/ Participating in the Conversation**

In the process of practicing the language of God, it is necessary for the candidate to practice the skills of the language. In order to engage in conversation with God, active listening—to one’s own heart, and to God’s voice—is crucial. How can the individual respond to God’s call if she does not listen attentively? Thus, listening to God’s voice is one of the ultimate concerns of those who seek to discern God’s will. Active listening is a powerful tool for developing sound relationships in general, and in particular, for cultivating an intimate relationship with God. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, listening is one

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<sup>38</sup> Osorio, “Spiritual Accompaniment during the *Spiritual Exercises* According to St. Ignatius of Loyola,” 89.

of the essential skills for both the exercitant and the director.<sup>39</sup> Besides practicing listening, they also have to understand what God is revealing to them. Thus, creating a space for silence, listening attentively to authentic desires and inner movements, meditation, contemplation, and the practice of daily “examination of conscience,” are means of support for both exercitant and director in the spiritual journey. In the following part, I will examine each of these points in turn.

### ***2.2.1. Practicing listening skills in engaging the conversation with God***

Attentive or active listening is a fundamental element of interpersonal communication skills. It demands full attention to the speakers and concentration on what is being conveyed. Listening with the ears may normally help us capture the surface meaning of spoken words. However, to fully understand a speaker’s message, particularly God’s message, both exercitant and director need to listen with the heart as well. Here it is important to note that in this three-person conversation, though God speaks to both, in the case of spiritual direction, the focus is on the retreatant. Listening by heart, the candidate can “hear” her inner voice and feelings, which often remain hidden within her. This endeavor requires creating space for silence and self-emptying in order to make more space for God. Only in this place of silence and emptiness can the candidate begin to attentively listen to her inner movements and authentic desires, and in these movements, to hear God’s voice—the language of God. In the Ignatian system, the language of God is often detected through the movements of consolation and desolation.

Although it is an essential task to know oneself in order to deepen the relationship with other people and with God, people often, in their busy lives, do not pay much

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<sup>39</sup> Katherine Dyckman, Mary Garvin, and Elizabeth Liebert. *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women*. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001), 157.

attention to what is happening within them. Anselm Gruen writes that “we will come to God only on a path that goes through sincere self-encounter, through listening to our thoughts and feelings, to our dreams, to our body, our concrete lives, and our relationships with other people.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, in order to discern the will of God in her life, a candidate needs to carefully observe what is happening within and around her through intuition, and by the light and wisdom of God to understand correctly what she has observed in her soul.<sup>41</sup>

This task calls the candidate to examine her feelings such as happiness or sadness, satisfaction or dissatisfaction, peace or distress, consolation or desolation. She must pay serious attention to her desires—what she really wants, and the messages of her body. Listening to her own desires is extremely important, particularly authentic desires, which “tend to reach into the very heart of our identities.”<sup>42</sup> Philip Sheldrake argues that “authentic desires come from our essential selves rather than from the surface of our personalities or from our immediate reactions to situations and experiences.”<sup>43</sup>

There are other reasons a candidate must attentively listen to her authentic desires. First, authentic desires play an important role in the recognition of one’s identity. Sheldrake<sup>44</sup> and Edward Kinerk<sup>45</sup> concur on this point. They assert that the more we

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<sup>40</sup> Nancy L. Bieber, *Decision-Making & Spiritual Discernment: The Sacred Art of Finding Your Way*, The Art of Spiritual Living (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2010), 65.

<sup>41</sup> Bieber, *Decision-Making & Spiritual Discernment*, 65–6.

<sup>42</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), 14.

<sup>43</sup> Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>45</sup> Edward E. Kinerk, “Eliciting Great Desires: Their Place in the Spirituality of the Society of Jesus” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 16 (1984): 3.

honestly determine our authentic desires, the more these desires will show us who we really are, helping us recognize the true self which it is covered by the layers of masks that we often wear in our lives. Thus, as Sheldrake affirms, “the more authentic our desires, the more they touch upon our identities and also upon the reality of God at the heart of ourselves.”<sup>46</sup> In this way, the candidate can think about her authentic desires as vocational in orientation, which lead her to what she is called “to become, to live, and to do.”<sup>47</sup> It is closely related to the questions “Who am I?” or “What do I want?” By asking these questions, the candidate approaches the nature of her unique vocation. Therefore, “the more honestly we seek to identify authentic desires, the more these desires will reveal what we really want and who we really are.”<sup>48</sup> Second, at some level, the deepest authentic desires of the candidate can lead her to transcend herself, moving her from self-centeredness to self-giving. In other words, the role of authentic desires is not limited to concern with herself but opens to a larger web—the growth of God’s kingdom.

Active listening to one’s own interior world through the heart, mind, and the grace of God is essential, especially when the candidate needs to make a decision and to discern the way forward. This task really challenges her. She must take time to create her own private space in order to go within herself to listen for the truth she finds there.<sup>49</sup> Nancy Bieber states that “we can’t find the way forward unless we provide a space for the truth to rise into our awareness.”<sup>50</sup> Active listening helps us look at our deep desires

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<sup>46</sup> Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires*, 15-6.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Kinerk, "Eliciting Great Desires," 3.

<sup>49</sup> Bieber, *Decision-Making & Spiritual Discernment*, 81.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

and opens us to receive the outcome. Opening our hearts prepares us for “a nudge from the spirit” so that we can notice the activities of the Spirit in our lives.<sup>51</sup> It is important to stress that active listening to one’s own interior motions must take place in both the candidate and director. They must cultivate their own relationship of intimacy with God by persistently listening to God’s words in deep silence and prayer so that they are able to intensify their awareness of the presence of God and gradually recognize God’s voice in their inner lives.

### ***2.2.2. Meditation and contemplation according to Ignatian tradition***

Human relationships can only grow and deepen when the people involved spend time together, when they intentionally listen to each other in order to understand what is truly being conveyed. Similarly, in the relationship between God and humans, individuals must cultivate an intimate relationship with God through prayer, which is the milieu of the Christian life. This intimacy with God in prayer is exemplified in Jesus’ relationship with the Father. In his earthly life, Jesus is constantly united with the Father in prayer, and teaches the disciples to pray.<sup>52</sup> In the Gospel of Luke, using the example of the persistent widow, Jesus urges the disciples to pray always and to not grow weary.<sup>53</sup> Our Lady is likewise an exemplar of prayer. For whatever happened to her and to Jesus, she “kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Bieber, *Decision-Making & Spiritual Discernment*, 81–2.

<sup>52</sup> For a good overview of Jesus’ prayer life, see Ernest E. Larkin, O. Carm., “The Personal Prayer Life of Jesus,” in *The Published Articles of Ernest E. Larkin, O.Carm.*, accessed October 23, 2017.

<sup>53</sup> Luke 18

<sup>54</sup> Luke 2:19

Ignatius was also a man of prayer. During his life, he spent many hours in prayer in order to discern the will of God. For example, when he was tormented by his scruples, he persisted “in his seven hours of prayer on his knees” [*SpEx* 23]. Ignatius always sought the will of God in prayer. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius guides the director and directee to pray in order to deepen the relationship with God through meditation and contemplation.

In the tradition of the Church, there is a rich diversity of prayer forms. However, in this part, I suggest that the director and directee should practice two basic methods of Ignatian prayer: *Meditation and Contemplation*. The reasons for this are twofold. First, prayer in the Ignatian tradition is “an intimate and interactive encounter with a personal God.”<sup>55</sup> Accordingly, throughout the meditations in the *Exercises*, the communication between God and the individual is emphasized. Second, this spirituality is applied to community life and is designed to empower “a dynamic service of God out in the marketplace.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, those who are living busy lives can find an appropriate way to pray amidst the activities of daily life. Both methods of prayer open the message of the Scriptures and lead to the heart.<sup>57</sup>

### ***Meditation***

The practice of meditation is introduced in the First Week of the *Spiritual Exercises*. According to Joseph A. Tetlow, meditation is “a way of coming to know Jesus

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<sup>55</sup> Hung Trung Pham, “Prayer in the Ignatian Tradition,” in Robert J. Wicks, ed., *Prayer in the Catholic Tradition: A Handbook of Practical Approaches* (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2016), 6983. Kindle.

<sup>56</sup> Tetlow, *Making Choices in Christ*, 2.

<sup>57</sup> Timothy M. Gallagher, *Meditation and Contemplation: An Ignatian Guide to Praying with Scripture*, (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2008), 97. Kindle.

Christ by remembering an event in his life. You recall it in great detail and in exact sequence to begin with, as you might some incident that you actually witnessed.”<sup>58</sup> After some distance from the incident, when one has had some time to interpret and reflect on it, one becomes increasingly a part of the event. It is this dynamic that occurs in the process of meditation on the events of Jesus’ life.<sup>59</sup>

Meditation is a reflective approach which consists of the use of three faculties: Memory, Understanding (intellect), and Will. All the faculties make extensive use of the imagination. Like the seven colors of light, these faculties are distinct but cannot be separated. Memory is used to call to mind the truths held there; intellect is used to understand, ponder, analyze, synthesize, compare, contrast, deduct, and induct the truths taken in; finally, by means of the will, the individual decides to get rid of a bad habit or to cultivate a particular virtue.<sup>60</sup> It is important to keep in mind the place of personal effort in practicing meditation. The individual tries to find the truth through personal effort rather through the advice of or input from others.

In the context of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius suggests a structure for meditation and contemplation. This includes (1) a preparatory prayer, (2) two or three preludes, (3) several points that make up the body of consideration, (4) colloquy, and (5) vocal prayer (notably, the Our Father).<sup>61</sup> The preparatory prayer consists of asking God for grace that all one’s intentions, actions, and operations be directed purely to the service

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<sup>58</sup> Tetlow, *Making Choices in Christ*, 68.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>60</sup> Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises*, 46.

<sup>61</sup> Dyckman, Garvin, and Liebert, *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed*, 117.

and praise of God [SpEx 46]. The Preamble or prelude composes all the parts of the mind as described: “Memory is directed to place the topic accurately in its context, the history of God’s dealing with humankind. The imagination is invited to create the place. The will is activated through asking for what one desires.”<sup>62</sup> The next part of the meditation consists of the points which develop the subject matter for consideration [SpEx 50-52]. Colloquy is heart-to-heart conversation between friends, or “a servant with a master, at times asking for some favour, at other times accusing oneself of something badly done, or sharing personal concerns and asking for advice about them” [SpEx 54]. Thus, it is crucial for the individual to be aware of her/his identity, and to understand who God is and the direction in which the relationship is moving.<sup>63</sup> Colloquy does not necessarily come at the end of the meditation, but may be resorted to at any time and place during the course of the meditation. Ignatius emphasizes the importance of colloquy, which he sometimes considers a new dimension of prayer.<sup>64</sup> Practicing meditation through the use of her faculties helps the exercitant dwell on God’s love and brings more awareness of herself as a “beloved sinner,” created in the image of God. Such awareness evokes within the exercitant “tears, sorrow, confusion, helplessness and repentance.”<sup>65</sup>

When engaging in meditation, it is important to be aware of its context, which requires “disciplined time, specific place and posture, exterior and interior awareness of the environment and attention to one’s desires.”<sup>66</sup> In other words, if the individual wants

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<sup>62</sup> Dyckman, Garvin, and Liebert, *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed*, 117.

<sup>63</sup> Pham, “Prayer in the Ignatian Tradition,” 6992. Kindle.

<sup>64</sup> Dyckman, Garvin, and Liebert, *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed*, 117.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 116–7.

to pray well, s/he must take “a break or withdrawal from . . . daily activities or routines to create space for the encounter with...God.”<sup>67</sup> This may involve “a process of letting go, of doing nothing, of surrendering.” Thus, as the individual gradually encounters God through active prayer and exercise, she becomes “more in tune, open, and ready to be led by God.”<sup>68</sup>

Though the individual who practices meditation may struggle with various forms of brokenness or disorder, when she encounters God’s steadfast love, she recognizes that she is nevertheless “constantly and continually loved and called by God.”<sup>69</sup> In other words, the exercitant’s meditation “moves from awareness, confusion and sorrow to a response of deep gratitude and love.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, continuing in the process of communication with God, the individual encounters God, who loves sinners and became human in Jesus Christ, subsequently “calling, inspiring, and attracting others to collaborate and to labor with God in the divine plan to save the human race.”<sup>71</sup>

### ***Contemplation***

Being moved by the unconditional love of God, the individual recognizes the significance of how God “became human *for me*...a unique individual human person both living in and bounded by a particular historical, cultural, and religious context.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Pham, “Prayer in the Ignatian Tradition,” 7000. Kindle.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 7017.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 7053.

<sup>70</sup> Dyckman, Garvin, and Liebert, *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed*, 155.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 7071.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

Accordingly, in order to deepen one's relationship with Jesus, the individual must accompany Jesus through his life by engaging the things that happened to him.<sup>73</sup> Contemplation on a Gospel scene is not "simply remembering it or going back in time," but through the act of contemplation, the Holy Spirit makes "present a mystery of Jesus' life in a way that is meaningful" for the individual at that moment.<sup>74</sup> Thus, the individual should use her own imagination to enter deeply into the story by paying attention to the details: the sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and feelings of the event so that God might interact with her in a unique and evocative way.<sup>75</sup> This understanding leads the individual to gradually become more identified with Jesus, whom she contemplates.<sup>76</sup> This process invites one to take time "to gaze and to engage, to watch and to ponder, to interact and to converse, to reflect and to discern," in order to become "more at home and alive with Jesus."<sup>77</sup>

In summary, meditation and contemplation are important forms of prayer in Ignatian spirituality whereby God speaks to the individual through her imagination, thoughts, and memories. The individual learns that God always embraces her—a sinner—with unconditional love. As a result, the individual grows in inner affection and cultivates intimacy with God through a journey of prayer that consists of watching,

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<sup>73</sup> Kevin O'Brien, *The Ignatian Adventure: Experiencing the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius in Daily Life* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2011), 15.

<sup>74</sup> Kevin O'Brien, "Ignatian Contemplation: Imaginative Prayer" accessed October 21, 2017. <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/ignatian-contemplation-imaginative-prayer>

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Pham, "Prayer in the Ignatian Tradition," 7080. Kindle.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 7080-89.

seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching God.<sup>78</sup> Then, being moved by Jesus, who loves her personally, suffered and died for her, the individual comes to imitate Jesus and desires to surrender to “the endless unconditional love of [her] lover—God.”<sup>79</sup>

Because the candidates of our community are all impacted in some way by the socio-cultural factors mentioned above—notably undue deference to authority figures and ignoring their own interior motions—they tend to lack self-awareness and the capacity to reflect critically on their own process. Furthermore, they are largely unfamiliar with the practice of reflection. Meditation can help them to withdraw from their daily activities and create space for God, and may lead to a process of letting go, of surrender. Accordingly, they will begin to listen actively to their own feelings and desires, something they have not been encouraged to do as traditional Vietnamese women. Praying in the first week of the Exercises can help the candidates grow in self-awareness of their various degrees of brokenness and disorder in the process of moving towards God. They also discover that God is a God who does not cease to love them unconditionally. While contemplating the Gospel scenes in the second week, the candidates will encounter Jesus directly, and in this way, grow in their capacity to create more space for Jesus in their hearts.

### ***2.2.3. The practice of daily “Examination of Conscience”***

George A. Aschenbrenner states that to live contemplatively means becoming the One we contemplate.<sup>80</sup> This is the heart of prayer. During the meditation and

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<sup>78</sup> Pham, “Prayer in the Ignatian Tradition,” 7080-89. Kindle.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 7134.

<sup>80</sup> George A. Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness Examen: Becoming God’s heart for the world” in in David L. Fleming, ed., *Contemporary Annotations: Ignatian Exercises*, The Best of the Review 4 (St. Louis, MO: Review for Religious, 1996), 113.

contemplation process, the individual encounters the overwhelming love of God, which empowers her to make progress in the spiritual life. Along with meditation and contemplation, the Consciousness Examen (or simply “Examen”) is the other form that is highly recommended for the candidate in order to continually engage in the conversation with God.

In practicing the examen, the individual first gives “thanks to God for the benefits received” [SpEx, 43]. To engage this prayer effectively, she needs to withdraw from all preoccupations in order to review God’s gifts as well as the activities and inner movements of the day in the light of the Holy Spirit. The examen begins “with gratitude for God’s concrete gifts during the day.”<sup>81</sup> According to Timothy Gallagher, when Ignatius calls us to such gratitude “he is opening a window into the deepest reality of our spiritual life: God’s unbounded love for us and desire for our response, in love, to the love revealed in this giving.”<sup>82</sup> Thus, the first step of the examen consists of recognizing the fundamental reality that it is God, and not us, who takes the initiative in leading God’s people to salvation, and who continues to bestow gifts upon them.<sup>83</sup>

The second point in the examen is “to ask for grace to know one’s sins and reject them” [SpEx, 43]. In this step, the individual turns to God and humbly asks for light and strength to help her to understand her inner motions so that she can overcome all that hinders her freedom and growth in the spiritual life.<sup>84</sup> In the next point, the individual is

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<sup>81</sup> Timothy M. Gallagher, *The Examen Prayer: Ignatian Wisdom for Our Lives Today* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2006), 749, Kindle.

<sup>82</sup> Gallagher, *The Examen Prayer*, 749, Kindle.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 776. Kindle.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 907. Kindle.

invited to take account of the soul, “hour by hour or from one period to another, first with regard to thoughts, then words, and finally deeds” [SpEx, 43]. Aschenbrenner explains that this part of the examen presumes that the individual becomes sensitive to her inner movements and comes to learn them seriously.<sup>85</sup> This disposition sensitizes the individual to God’s love and causes her to recognize the need to make some changes in light of her growing awareness of this profound, unconditional love. She will then ask forgiveness of God for her failings [SpEx, 43]. This move will touch deep relational spaces in the heart as the individual comes to know at a deep level that she is loved by God in all her brokenness, struggles, sufferings, failures, and weaknesses.<sup>86</sup> Gallagher asserts that the act of asking for forgiveness is “an essentially relational step, the human person in relationship with the divine Person.”<sup>87</sup>

Finally, after looking back, the individual is encouraged to look forward, to pray for spiritual progress. This step focuses on the awareness of the next day, as the individual anticipates how she will respond to God’s call and grow in the spiritual life, “forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead.”<sup>88</sup> The practice of daily examination of conscience provides the candidates with a chance to look back their lives. This practice challenges the candidates in a Vietnamese context to establish sound habits of reflection on their own process, countering what Công Trần describes as

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<sup>85</sup> George A. Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness Examen,” in David L. Fleming, ed., *Notes on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, 180.

<sup>86</sup> Gallagher, *The Examen Prayer*, 1169. Kindle.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 1264. Kindle.

<sup>88</sup> Philippians 3:13

laziness in terms of critical thinking.<sup>89</sup> Thus, it is crucial for them to practice the daily examen in order to increase their self-awareness and detect the language of God in their lives.

### **Conclusion**

In the spiritual journey, the individual cultivates her personal relationship with Jesus by practicing the language of God. The guidelines laid out by this chapter are highly recommended for the candidate and the director as the essential factors in the decision-making process. It is crucial that both parties be aware of their respective roles and responsibilities in the discernment process. In order for the spiritual journey to be fruitful, certain qualities are necessary for both the director and candidate. For the director, this will entail self-awareness, personal integration and wholeness in Christ, a strong prayer life, humility, adequate theological grounding, and above all, sensitivity to the movements of the Spirit in the candidate. For the candidate, the requisite qualities include transparency with God, herself, and the director, a commitment to prayer, and the recognition of her own agency in the cultivation of her spiritual progress.

The practice of active listening supports the individual in understanding her own inner motions and authentic desires, and through these movements, to hear the voice of God. Practicing the various forms of prayer helps the individual to cultivate intimacy with God, and to become aware of her own identity as she recognizes God's unconditional love for her. This is the milieu in which the candidate will discern God's will for her life and be empowered to collaborate in the unfolding of this plan.

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<sup>89</sup> Công Trần, "Những thói quen xấu về tư duy của giới trẻ ngày nay," (The Bad Habits in the Thinking of Young People Today) accessed Nov 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017, <https://tndcong.wordpress.com/2015/01/02/thoi-quen-xau-ve-tu-duy-cua-gioi-tre-ngay-nay/>. Translation from the Vietnamese to English is mine.

## CONCLUSION

For the Christian, especially those who desire to follow Jesus by living the consecrated life, listening to God's call and responding to the voice of God is the ultimate goal. From my experiences during the six years I have served as the spiritual director of my community, I have found that in the Vietnamese context, there are positive and negative features which impact young people in discerning their life vocation. Many candidates are drawn to the consecrated life because of exemplary religious men and women who live simply in both cities and rural areas to serve the poor and marginalized with kind-heartedness in order to become witnesses to Jesus' love. Thus, young people desire to discern their vocations in order to tune their lives with God's will. However, it is very difficult for young people to discern their life direction because they are impacted by many cultural and socio-economic factors. Most importantly, misunderstanding who God is, and what God wills for their lives, causes a considerable lack of clarity with regard to their capacity to hear God's voice. They believe that God has a fixed or pre-determined plan for them, and that their task is simply to identify and follow that plan. Furthermore, they assume that parents or religious leaders have privileged access to this plan. All these factors have significantly conditioned their decision-making process. Thus, detecting the language of God is crucial.

This thesis has sought to demonstrate that God continues to labor actively in the world to save God's creation and that humans have an important and active role to play in this ongoing work. A brief survey of the Scriptures and the lives of several distinguished spiritual figures in the Church interpreted the notion of the "will of God" as God's unfolding (and fluid) plan. In this understanding, humans are called to collaborate with

God in order to fulfill this dynamic plan in their lives and communities. They respond to this call by first learning to detect God's language in order to tune their lives according to God's will.

Throughout the long history of the relationship between God and God's people, the on-going process of detecting God's language consists of dynamic movements. The Fathers of the Church underline the crucial role of the Scriptures and the personal relationship with God in the spiritual life. Accordingly, studying, understanding, and contemplating the sacred scriptures are crucial in daily life. Moreover, several of these figures, notably Gregory of Nyssa, stress the present, individual moment of encounter with God. Furthermore, the interior place of the heart becomes the locus of the union with God, particularly for Augustine. Accordingly, a humble interior attitude is necessary in terms of the ability to open the heart in order to receive God's grace. Learning from the wisdom of the Fathers, the distinguished spiritual figures in medieval times continue to stress the important role of the Scriptures. They practice the language of God not only in words but in actions, focusing on charity, loving and caring for the poor, preaching the Gospels, reclaiming wholeness in the spiritual life, and giving prophetic witness to a life of modest living.

Ignatius of Loyola, through his life experience and journey, developed one way to detect God's communication to him. By reflecting upon and analyzing the diverse movements in his soul, Ignatius gradually grew in his capacity to understand God's will. Therefore, inner movements are a kind of language of God by which God communicated with him. From his own experiences of detecting the way God interacted with him, he synthesized and codified these encounters as the *Spiritual Exercises*. This work became

the foundational tool of support for those who seek to detect the language of God. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius elaborated two sets of rules for discernment of spirits in order to help the exercitants in their process of discerning God's will.

In the first set of rules, Ignatius unfolds the diversity, complexity, and importance of interior movements in the spiritual life. Those who desire to grow in love and move towards God must cultivate self-awareness and the capacity to discern the workings of the spirits within themselves through the diverse motions of spiritual consolation or desolation. Then, they can collaborate with God's grace to be guided by the good spirit, to reorder their desires, and to reject anything contrary to the divine movements within their soul. In the second set of the rules, Ignatius alerts the exercitants to be careful of the disjunction between the phenomenon and the reality, in which "the phenomenon is good but the reality is actually evil."<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the rules of discernment will become a powerful tool to assist the exercitants in distinguishing the works of the spirits within their souls in order to cultivate intimacy with God and to discern God's will for their lives. However, it is crucial to keep in mind that rules of discernment are not mathematical in the sense that two plus two equals four. Even though we know well all the rules, these rules cannot fully capture the language of God. God's language far transcends all human rules and formulas.

Considering the social, cultural, and religious realities of Vietnam, this study has introduced guidelines to assist the candidates of our community to make progress in the spiritual journey and to recognize the movements of the spirits within their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Buckley, *The Structure of the Rules for Discernment of Spirits*. Accessed November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017 <https://www.theway.org.uk/back/s020Buckley.pdf>, 31.

Practicing the various forms of prayer can help the candidates to deeply engage in the process of discernment. In this way, they are not outsiders watching their parents or religious leaders make the decisions for their vocations. They themselves must do this by taking time to learn and practice the language of God. Together with God, they can then begin to unfold God's plan for their lives.

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