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Discernment of Vocation in the Jesuit Candidate House of
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**DISCOVERING THE ROLE OF DESIRE IN IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY
FOR DISCERNMENT OF VOCATION
IN THE JESUIT CANDIDATE HOUSE OF VIETNAM**

A THESIS BY

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ABSTRACT

DISCOVERING THE ROLE OF DESIRE IN IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY FOR DISCERNMENT OF VOCATION IN THE JESUIT CANDIDATE HOUSE OF VIETNAM

Pham Dinh Cu, S.J.

Many candidates in the Jesuit Candidate House of Vietnam have shared that their vocation began with desires. We do not judge whether they are good or bad desires, but we can sure that those desires were influenced by various factors: culture, society, traditions, family background, and so on. This study is the discovering that in Ignatian spirituality, desire can direct people to God, giving them a foundation and criterion for discerning their vocation. Desire can also transform their spiritual life.

First, it presents an overview of the Vietnamese context, including the Catholic Church, religious vocations, and Jesuit vocations and presents opportunities and challenges for the discernment of religious vocations in general, and Jesuit vocations particularly. Then it will examine texts from selected authors in the history of Christian spirituality. These writings contribute key aspects of understanding desire. The center point for this study is focusing on the works of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the *Autobiography* and the *Spiritual Exercises* to discuss on Ignatius' desires and his experiences of how to deal with these desires with God's help. These examples from Ignatius suggest the importance of desire in Ignatian spirituality and its relevance to discernment of vocation. Finally it will suggest the exercises for a three days discernment of vocation, based on the exercise "the Call of the King" (Sp.Ex. 95).

Through the Exercise "The Call of The King," we discover a way to transform human desires. Jesus transforms their desires by inviting them to share with Him what is God's dream for Him and for them. Jesus' desire transforms them from sinners to become God's friends and His disciples. This Exercise can be a meaningful tool in a discernment of vocation not only for the Jesuit Candidate House in Vietnam but also for any formation house helping young people find a better way to follow Jesus. This study is a response to the need of a discernment of vocation for young people in religious orders.

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

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INTRODUCTION

In the past, I spent three years working in the Jesuit candidate House in Vietnam. During that time, I had the opportunity of helping young men who first became interested in the Society of Jesus with discerning their vocation. I also accompanied those who had been with the Jesuits for a while. In general, I assisted these young men in their journey of responding to the call of our Lord Jesus, who invited them to offer their lives in the service of the Kingdom in accordance with Jesuit Spirituality. From this mission, I have learned that there are many challenges for those in Vietnam who are discerning a vocation to the Society of Jesus as well as other religious orders. These challenges concern both those who are leading the discernment and those who are participating in it.

As vocation promoters, while organizing a discernment of vocation, we are reminded that our task is not merely to look for and select vocations for the Society of Jesus. Rather, as directors who guide young men to discern their vocation, we need to help seekers choose a direction in life and freely decide about who they want to become in the future. “Vocation” means God calls, and humans respond to this call. A discernment of vocation involves discovering signs of God’s call among conflicting voices, especially in their desires. What do they desire for their lives? What is God’s will for them in the future? These are practical questions for a discernment of vocation.

Normally, young people can experience a tension when they reflect on their desires. They must deeply consider Jesus’ call, “If any of you want to come with me, you must forget yourself and bear your cross and follow me.” (Mt 16:24). Many young men who come for a discernment of vocation are inspired by these words of Jesus so much that they think they must give up their personal desires in order to follow God’s will. It

can experience a tension between their desire for God and their desire for other things. Even if they seek God's will and wish to enter religious life, they also desire other things, such as a good job or higher education, etc. They can also experience tension between the desires of other people and God's desire for them. On the one hand, they want to obey God's will. On the other hand, they want to fulfill the expectations of their parents. This can generate a tension between their personal desires and what other people desire of them, including the desires of persons in authority. These tensions influence their motivation, choice, and decision-making abilities.

Formators consider a quality vocation both in terms of the selection of candidates and the formation of their religious lives. How can we know good motivations? Motivations can be mixed between human desire and God's desire for candidates. "God's will for us emanates from the point where our desires and God's desires for us commingle."¹ For Jesuits, the question is how to assist young people sort these tensions in the context of a discernment of vocation. We know that desire played a very important role in the life of Saint Ignatius and in his spirituality. In my thesis, I will present the role of desire in Ignatian spirituality in three dimensions: its direction for life; the need for it in a discernment of vocation; and its giving energy for the spiritual life. Through this study, I will examine the role of desire in helping young people reconcile their internal tensions. Therefore, this role serves as an important instrument in enabling both candidates and directors in the Jesuit Candidate House in Vietnam in the discernment of religious vocation.

¹Denis Donoghue, "God's Will: Where Desires Commingle," in David L. Fleming, ed., *Sharing Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, The Best of the Review 9, (St. Louis, MO: Review for Religious, 2008), 210.

This study employs social, historical, and theological approaches. Social interpretation will help recognize the opportunities and challenges that affect the motivations of young men seeking to join religious life, particularly the Society of Jesus in Vietnam. Historical research on the understanding of desire in the history of Christian spirituality will point out the important role of desire in the spiritual life and in discernment of a religious vocation. Theological reflection on the relationship between God and humanity will serve as the center point of discernment of vocation.

This study falls within the field of Ignatian spirituality in relating to religious vocation and religious life. I will contextualize my understanding of desire and its role in discerning Jesuit vocations in the Jesuit Candidacy Program in Vietnam. Accordingly, this thesis unfolds in four chapters. Chapter One presents an overview of the Vietnamese context, including the Catholic Church, religious vocations, and Jesuit vocations. This chapter also presents opportunities and challenges for the discernment of religious vocations in general, and Jesuit vocations.

In the next two chapters, I will use two sets of sources for research desire. Chapter Two examines texts from selected authors in the history of Christian spirituality, such as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Gregory of Nyssa, Bernard of Clairvaux, Teresa of Avila, Gregory the Great, and Catherine of Siena. These writings contribute key aspects of understanding desire. They focus on the relationship between God and human beings, in which God always acts first. God is calling and drawing people to God; then humans can respond to God's call. This generates a conversation between God's desire for humanity and human desires for God in which a vocation can be discovered.

Chapter Three will focus on the works of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the *Autobiography* and the *Spiritual Exercises*. I will discuss Ignatius' desires and his experiences of how to deal with these desires with God's help. There are two important moments in Ignatius' life concerning his discernment of desire. At Loyola, reflecting on his desires helped him grow in self-awareness and begin his process of conversion. At Jerusalem, his desires could not be carried out because of a ban by ecclesiastical authority. This experience helped him grow in discernment and distinguish between God's will and his own desires. These examples from Ignatius suggest the importance of desire in Ignatian spirituality and its relevance to discernment of vocation.

The last chapter will discuss the role of desire in the discernment of vocation. I suggest the Spiritual Exercises 95 as a model for the discernment of religious vocation in the Jesuit candidate house. This Exercise, "The call of the King," invites candidates to pay attention not only to their desires but more importantly to the desires of God and the call of Jesus for them. This introduces a process of discernment, first to be aware of oneself and of what is influencing one's life, desires, motivation, and decision making. This discernment is placed under the guidance of the Spiritual Exercises. Its purpose is to help people reorder their life from disordered affections and then guide them to be indifferent to all created things so that they may have more freedom to choose to follow Jesus Christ in a way that God desires for them.

The discernment of vocation focuses on seeking God's will in one's life. "Such discernment, even though it includes reason and prudence, goes beyond them, for it seeks a glimpse of that unique and mysterious plan God has for each of us."² The voice of God

²Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit: To Young People and To The Entire People of God* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2019), 129.

is not far from us but has been incarnated into our deepest desires. Discovering the role of desire in Ignatian spirituality attempts to clarify one's deepest desire so that it can be distinguished from other desires. In this way, a person can more clearly recognize God's call. This study aims directly at helping to organize a discernment of vocation in the Jesuit Candidate House. More widely, this study may also be useful for responding to the need of vocation discernment for young people in Vietnam.

CHAPTER ONE:

A RICH HARVEST IN THE FIELD OF VIETNAM

Introduction

It is important to realize God's will, especially at a time when we need to make an important decision or a choice in our life. In the Catholic Church in Vietnam, there are many young people who need to be helped with a discernment of vocation. They desire to follow Jesus and discern who God wants them to become. This is a sign of hope for the future of the Church because there are still generous hearts who wish to share Jesus' mission to proclaim the Good News to their brothers and sisters. This is also a requirement of responding to the needs of the young generation who desire a brighter horizon but are being pulled in different directions.

By organizing a process for a discernment of vocation, the Jesuit Candidacy in Vietnam helps young men to become aware that following Jesus in discipleship is a long process of hearing His call by reflecting, discerning one's desires and motivations, and responding freely to the call. The process is not so straightforward; there are general challenges for those who are discerning vocations in the formation houses of various religious orders in Vietnam and in the Jesuit Candidate House as well. There are challenges to both, those who are leading a discernment of vocation and those who are participating in it.

To specify these challenges, this chapter will describe an overview of the Catholic Church in Vietnam with both opportunities and challenges as a general context for discernment of religious vocation in Vietnam. After that, I will present basic ideas about the Jesuit Candidacy program in Vietnam from which I received my inspiration for this

thesis. Finally, I will interpret the challenges and opportunities for a discernment of vocation in the Jesuit Candidate House in Vietnam.

I. The General Context of Religious Vocation in Vietnam

1. Catholics in Vietnam

In 2018, the Catholic Church in Vietnam celebrated its 485th year of receiving the Good News of the gospel of Jesus Christ (1533 - 2018). After almost five centuries, many Vietnamese Christians have now become missionaries. They are following the footsteps of Western missionaries who brought the Good News and faith to Vietnam, to the way of evangelization to many places all over the world. This, among many other signs shows how the seed of faith in the Vietnamese Church is growing and bearing fruit. It is said that the Catholic Church in Vietnam survived because she was protected and nurtured in the tradition of families and parishes, which is rooted in Vietnamese culture. Beginning early in their history, the Vietnamese lived and connected together through very strong relationships of family lines of descent, and in village life. In this cultural situation, faith descended from generation to generation during persecutions and difficult times in the Church and in the country.³

Today, the Church in Vietnam is continuously growing rooted in its Vietnamese culture and context. Her faith and spirit have become strong and mature by fighting persecution and difficulties under the Communist government. Currently, the Catholic Church in Vietnam is organized into 27 dioceses of three archdioceses: Hanoi in the north, Hue in the central, and Saigon in the south. There are approximately 6.8 million Catholics in Vietnam (6.812.954 in

³Đỗ Quang Chính, *Tản Mạn Lịch Sử Giáo Hội Công Giáo Việt Nam*, (History of the Catholic Church in Vietnam), (Frisco, TX: An tôn & Đuốc Sáng, 2007), 114-118.

2017), representing 7% of the total population.⁴ The church faces the ongoing challenge of religious freedom and control in its relationship with the government. Further, the opening of the country to the world brings about both opportunities and new challenges for the nation and for the Church as well, opportunities for development of the economy, education, and trade. However, these opportunities can also bring challenges for the moral and spiritual life that affect people in general even the Vietnamese faithful.

In this context, Vietnam is a rich harvest of evangelization. God is calling many young Vietnamese, women and men, to work on God's field. The Church in Vietnam still needs enthusiastic laborers to work not only in the field of Vietnam but also in the large vineyard of God around the world.

2. Religious Vocation in Vietnam

Traditionally, Vietnamese Catholic families hold religious persons in high regard because of their self-sacrificing attitude in serving a "higher purpose" in God and God's people, their virtues and good example, and their being well educated as well. Thus, many parents encourage, even orient, their children to offer their lives to serve God and the Church through the religious life. The family becomes the first place of vocation promotion. People may wonder why the number of religious vocations in the world-church is decreasing, but the Church in Vietnam still has a large number of youth who desire to offer their lives to serve God and God's people. There are many men and women religious sent over the world as missionaries. Also many religious congregations,

⁴Đào Trung Hiệu, OP, "Những Mốc Lịch Sử Quan Trọng Của GHCGVN," (Important Historical Milestones of the Catholic Church in Vietnam), <https://www.hdgmvietnam.com/chi-tiet/nhung-moc-lich-su-quan-trong-cua-ghcgvn-31228>.

both men and women, come to Vietnam to find vocations. Religious vocations are plentiful in Vietnam.

Presently, in Vietnam, there are 310 different religious orders and congregations in 27 dioceses, counting 34,355 religious (5,316 brothers and 29,039 sisters) and 1,866 religious priests.⁵ A number of foreign religious orders have come to Vietnam to find vocations, and formation houses and communities have increased during the past fifteen years. Vietnam has become a rich source for religious vocations. On one hand, this opens up opportunities for the Church to have many laborers in the field of God, not just in Vietnam but also around the world. This presents an opportunity to get good vocations for those who desire to serve God and the Church. There are various possibilities to serve among different religious congregations and orders as a suitable way to respond to God's call. In the past, most young people only knew about religious life through sisters of Lovers of the Holy Cross (a local sister congregation), diocesan priests, and some well-known congregations in Vietnam such as Dominicans, Franciscans, Salesians, Jesuits, Sisters of Saint Paul de Chartre, Sours De la Providence De Pertieux, and Daughters of Charity. Today, this view of religious life is widely opened to number of new religious orders with various spiritualities.

On the other hand, this context can create complications for the discernment of vocation and admission to vocations as well. In view of multiple choices, among many good ways to choose, the choice for a better way itself can be complicated. For young people who come to discern their vocation, the convenience of getting information about religious orders may create in them an attitude like people going to a shopping mall to

⁵ Vu Quang Trung, Reports on Activities of Religious Life Office of the Vietnam Conference of Catholic Bishops 2019 (HCM, 15th September 2019), Internal documents.

choose what they want. Instead of finding and responding to God's call, they may look for a religious order as applying for job or finding opportunities to improve their social position. This situation can create confusion for people between their seeking and responding to the call of God and their looking to satisfy their own needs.⁶

Therefore, before this multiple choice and making a decision about their vocation, there are many questions for young people. Do they have a religious vocation? Which spirituality does God call them to follow: contemplative or active? Which religious order fits with them? There are many young men and women going around formation houses of different religious orders but struggling to find a fitting place for themselves. This complicated context is not a negative or bad condition; rather, it is a challenge for young people. They are looking for a discernment of vocation to guide them to choose a suitable way of life. This is a good opportunity for contributing to discernment of vocation to respond to their need.

II. The Jesuit Candidacy Program in Vietnam

1. The Society of Jesus in Vietnam

In 2015, the Society of Jesus in Vietnam celebrated 400 years since the first Jesuits arrived in Vietnam. Among the first group of Jesuit missionaries, father Alexandre de Rhodes (1593 - 1660) remains one of the most famous for his efforts in petitioning Rome to establish a hierarchy with the local clergy in Vietnam, and his contributions in the formation of the national script of Vietnam. During the Suppression of the Society of Jesus (1759 - 1814), like most places in the world, Jesuits were called back to Rome or

⁶Nguyễn Thế Truyền, O.P., “Những Thách Thức Của Việc Đào Tạo Ôn Gọi,” (The Challenges of Formatting of Religious Vocation, The Sharing with Union of Religious Orders of Xuan Loc Diocese,) Bài chia sẻ với Liên Tu Sĩ Gp. Xuân Lộc tại Tu viện Mactino, Hồ Nai, 21/3/2019, <https://thinhviendaminh.net/nhung-thach-thuc-cua-viec-dao-tao-on-goi/>

simply left to join other religious orders. In 1782, almost ten years after the Suppression, João de Luureiro was among the last known Jesuit returning to Lisbon, Portugal, after having served as court mathematician and physician for the king of Vietnam.⁷ In 1957, Jesuits were invited back to Vietnam. Subsequently, they were asked to run the Pontifical College of Saint Pius X in Dalat to help train seminarians and clerics for the church in Vietnam coming from local Vietnamese communities.⁸ After 1975, when the communist government took over the whole country, all foreign Jesuits were expelled from Vietnam. However, a small group of native Vietnamese Jesuits, who had already been formed, remained.

From this small group of 26 Vietnamese Jesuits in 1975, after 44 years, the members of the Society of Jesus have increased to 280 according to the *Catalogus Provinciae Vietnamensis Societatis Iesus 2019*. The past fifteen years have been marked by a rapid rise in the numbers of young Jesuits in formation. Consequently, the Society of Jesus in Vietnam has been facing many challenges that pertain to the requirement of an updated formation program. Besides this challenge, Jesuits continue to look for young men who are yearning for God's Kingdom and for the sake of souls to share with them the spirituality of "For the Greater Glory of God." Therefore, vocation promotion and candidacy programs are considered one of the priorities of mission among Vietnamese Jesuits.

⁷ S. Harris, "Mapping Jesuit Science: The Role of Travel in the Geography of Knowledge," in *The Jesuits: Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts* edited by J. O'Malley et al., Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1999, 212 – 240, 213.

⁸ Nguyễn Cao Siêu, S.J., *Kỷ Yếu Mừng 50 Năm Dòng Tên Trở Lại Phục Vụ tại Việt Nam 1957 - 2007*, 60-129, (The Summary record celebration of 50th anniversary of the second arrival of the Jesuits in Vietnam, 1957 - 2007), Internal documents.

2. Vietnamese Jesuit Candidates

Who is a Jesuit candidate? In general, “he is a young man approved by the Society of Jesus to seek the loving call of our Lord Jesus, who wants him to offer his whole life to the service of the Kingdom in accordance with Jesuit Spirituality. Then by the help of God’s grace, he may be accepted into the Society to become a Jesuit.”⁹ This understanding of Jesuit candidacy is mentioned in the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus. The General Examen mentions about four different classes of candidates in probation. They are priests, brothers, scholastics, and novices.¹⁰ In this thesis, I will concentrate on the Jesuit candidate as a young man who is in training to prepare for his first probation, the novitiate. Father Perter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., the former general superior of the Society of Jesus (1983 - 2008) describes the Jesuit candidacy program as “preparation for the novitiate”:

In the Society, there is no postulancy either for the Scholastics or for Brothers. But the candidates who do not yet have sufficient human, spiritual and academic preparation should not be admitted to the novitiate. In this case, in order to arrive at the necessary maturity and preparation and thus obtain the fruits of the novitiate, the candidates may be entrusted to some fathers or brothers who can accompany and help them in this preparation.¹¹

Young men are accepted in a Jesuit candidacy program as those whom we, Jesuit candidacy formators, believe are ready to undergo a period of probation and discernment to understand whether God is calling them to become Jesuits. While they show a desire for religious life, they are not yet sure that God is indeed calling them, or whether or not

⁹*The Guideline for the Jesuit Candidacy in Vietnam no 1*, Internal using.

¹⁰John W. Padberg, S.J., edit, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms: A Complete English translation of the Official Latin Texts*, (Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 23-27.

¹¹Perter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., *The Formation of Jesuits: From the Letters of Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J.* (Rome: General Curia of The Society of Jesus, 2003), 30.

they are suitable for a Jesuit vocation. Through the candidacy program, it is our hope that they can receive help to gather concrete data for their discernment, especially related to life within the community, studies and the experience of God through prayer, from which they can discover clearly God's will for them.

In Vietnam, in order to become a Jesuit candidate, young men have to finish their high school, then apply to join a three-day recollection for the discernment of vocation. During this time, they are accompanied by a guide or a director, and will reflect on their desires and try to discern God's call to them. After the recollection, if they realize they have a strong desire to serve God and God's people, and if the director observes some signs that indicate they can continue growing in the Society, they will be accepted to become a candidate to continue seeking the loving call of our Lord Jesus. Then, they will join the long process of discernment of vocation in the Jesuit Candidate House while continuing their studies in college or university.

Because of the special context of Vietnam, on the one hand the candidate house is organized as a minor seminary to support their education and help them grow in their vocation. On the other hand, under the strict policy of religion under the communist government, candidates are assigned into small houses so that they can stay as students to continue their study in colleges, or universities while following the candidacy program. In the candidate house, they are helped in developing all aspects of one's being such as one's humanity, knowledge, community life, and apostleship.

3. Discernment of Vocation in the Jesuit Candidate House

The Jesuit Candidate House in Vietnam offers two kinds of discernment of vocations to young people. First, we organize three days of recollection for those who are

looking for a better way to live a meaningful life as God is calling them. Coming for discernment, these young men can sense some interest in a consecrated vocation even though they do not know much about what it means to live a religious life. During this time, young people seek to understand if they desire to be in a vocation and if God wants them to follow Him, to become a religious person or to be a layperson. In this process of discernment, the director can decide if a young man can be accepted to the Jesuit candidacy or not. Second, for Jesuit candidates who are not yet Jesuits but desire to share their lives with us according to Ignatian spirituality, the Jesuit candidacy program will help them continue discerning God's call. Saint Ignatius desires that they must have signs of developing and remaining in "freedom, devotion, spiritual profit, and merit, which are found in binding oneself to Christ our Lord."¹² A discernment of vocation in the Jesuit Candidacy, therefore, seeks to clarify one's vocation at two levels: whether or not one is called by God to be a Jesuit, and whether one is called to the Brotherhood or the Priesthood in the Society of Jesus.

These kinds of discernment of vocation are applications of the discernment of God's will that the founder of the Society of Jesus has handed down to the Church and to his followers. Having a clear understanding of a vocation becomes significant to both those who come to discern their vocation and to the director who helps them discern. This is a process of discerning motivations and desires, to be free to choose and to respond to God's call, and to enter a progression of reflections on God's voice in daily life.

¹²John W. Padberg, S.J., edit, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms: A Complete English translation of the Official Latin Texts*, 27.

III. Opportunities and Challenges in Discernment of Vocation in the Jesuit Candidate House in Vietnam

Twenty years ago, I was accepted to be a Jesuit candidate in Vietnam. I came to know the Society of Jesus when my parish priest, who graduated from a Jesuit school, told me about Ignatian spirituality and Jesuit formation. At that time, young people who knew about religious vocations started to discover their desire for religious life and to respond to God's call from within their parishes. Many of us knew about the Society of Jesus because of our relatives who were religious men and women who had good relationships with Jesuits because of the practice of the Spiritual Exercises. Then the internet arrived in the 1990s opening a new era of opportunities for the youth in Vietnam. Around the same time, the new diplomatic policy opened Vietnam wide open and rebuilt its relationship with the rest of the world after 20 years of isolation. People had new ways to learn about the world. Young people could easily find information about various religious congregations and their spiritualities so that they could discover what is suitable for them. This general context created both opportunities and challenges for discernment of vocations. The Situation Analysis of the Jesuit Candidacy Program in Vietnam,¹³ SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) and my own experiences of working there (2015 - 2018), allows for an evaluative overview of the Jesuit Candidate House.

1. Opportunities

After becoming province in 2007, the Society of Jesus in Vietnam emerged from hiding and became more visible in various parts throughout the country. The Province is

¹³This analysis was presented by father Phạm Minh Thắng, S.J. in the annual meeting of Jesuit formators, Ho Chi Minh, June 2010.

more widely recognized by people, especially young men. The number of Jesuit vocations is now rising. To support the promotion of vocations, the Province has a particular investment in the Candidate House. The organizational structure of the candidacy program has been clarified. Along with the consolidation a team of formators, a group of Jesuit scholastics has been appointed for vocation promotion. The formation infrastructure has been developed. A new center that houses candidates was built in 2018 for main events and gatherings. In addition, we receive generous assistance from benefactors so that we can organize and maintain ten different houses (8 in Ho Chi Minh City and 2 in Ha Noi) for candidates' housing. In 2017, the Jesuit candidate house in Vietnam had 120 candidates under the direction of three formators. The candidates are assigned into three groups. The first group has 52 young men in colleges and universities. The second group includes 40 candidates who have graduated but need time to improve their English. The third group has 32 pre-novices who are in final preparation to enter the novitiate.¹⁴ This situation is an open opportunity for development of the candidacy program.

In terms of discernment of vocation in Vietnam today, a serious question confronts the youth and those who accompany them. How do young people prepare and plan for their future? On the one hand, there are various opportunities for them to achieve their desires in many diverse fields. Globalization has reduced the differences among persons, countries, and cultures. In addition, such a new phenomenon binds people together and offers to them opportunities for discovering new aspects of life and new ways for serving the universal Church. On the other hand, the social context in Vietnam

¹⁴Phạm Đình Cư, "The Report of the Vietnamese Jesuit Candidate House for the Annual Meeting of Jesuit Formators of Vietnam Province," Ho Chi Minh, June 2017 (internal document).

creates a complicated system of values. Many youth face the difficulty of making a decision regarding which values they should follow. Cultural homogenization can create confusion for people about their identity. People may face difficulties regarding their unique identity, and understanding who they are and whom they want to become. Everything may become chaotic for the youth who are at across-roads in life. They would benefit from help and companions. This is an opportunity for the discernment of vocation to contribute its fruits to young people.

Recently, our experiences in promoting vocations have recognized the rich sources for Jesuit vocations that come from tradition and culture. In Vietnamese culture, the family is of significant help in nourishing and promoting religious vocations. Parents are the first vocation promoters who guide their children from the beginning of their spiritual journey and direct them toward religious life. Vietnamese culture also holds religious persons in high regard. In addition, in the tradition of the Catholic Church in Vietnam, from the time of the missionaries until now there has existed a cultural organization that is called the House of God and is known as a spiritual family. This spiritual family normally includes a priest as the spiritual father. His spiritual children are men and women religious as well as young people who desire to become religious persons. Once these youth join a spiritual family, they are supported by both a spiritual life and expenses for education and daily life.¹⁵ Along with spiritual family, many lay benefactors adopt those who intend to join religious life, supporting their lives and especially their expenses. This is one of the concrete ways of promoting religious vocations.

¹⁵Đỗ Quang Chính, *Tản Mạn Lịch Sử Giáo Hội Công Giáo Việt Nam*, 119-123.

In addition, reflecting on our ministry with students, we realize that the youth today can receive a better education and have many more opportunities to get good jobs than the previous generation, but they are also facing a crisis of values and are yearning for deeper and richer spiritual values. In this ministry, Jesuits offer the Spiritual Exercises and other spiritual nourishment, which help the youth to hear the invitation and to discern, to choose, and to decide to follow a particular way, which Jesus might be calling them. Every summer, Jesuits in Vietnam conduct around eighteen to twenty of the five-day Exercises for mostly university students throughout the country. This ministry creates an advantageous atmosphere for young men to keep in touch with Jesuits, collaborate with them in some charitable ministries, at the same time serves as a way to make religious life alive among them. This is also an opportunity for Jesuits to introduce Jesuit spirituality to young people.

These opportunities somehow explain why we still have many Jesuit vocations in Vietnam while number of vocations is shrinking in other places. The need for discernment of vocation is high and people expect high quality from this discernment as well. Having many vocations also requires our preparation and responsibility for nourishing these vocations. From this situation, we can get a good number of vocations, but people can question us about the quality of these vocations. How can we foster quality vocations? This question challenges both directors of vocational discernment and formators of the candidate house and challenges them to be aware of what is affecting young people and their motivations for religious life.

2. Challenges

In Vietnam, although opportunities are opening to the Society of Jesus and other religious orders, both local and international, to form a good candidate remains a serious challenge. The quality of religious vocation is emphasized through the motivations and freedom of candidates. Even though many young women and men desire to join religious life, there are various reasons for their motivations that affect their freedom to choose and to make decisions. Such a challenge involves mainly with the social, economic, social, and cultural context of the candidate.

During my three years working in the Vietnamese Jesuit Candidate House, I realized that our candidates mostly come from provinces in the countryside; few of them from cities. This phenomenon suggests that motivation of the candidates may be influenced by economic and social considerations. Discuss this influence in “*Asian Vocations Today*,” Archbishop Orlando B. Quevedo, OMI, suggested that “the economic factor deeply impacts the Asian family and, therefore, Asian vocations.”¹⁶ The bishop noted that a specific culture “marked by marginalization, with inadequate access to education, health services, the benefits of development. More than any family, members of families of material disadvantage often dream of upward mobility for their children, pursuing better education, securing better jobs, so to obtain better quality of life.” This culture can create an opportunity for people to kindle motivations toward life development, toward sharing and serving, all of which can be good motivations for religious life. However, this context can also involve motivations merely for self-interest. Bishop Orlando urged, “Thus one needs to look closely at the great number of applicants

¹⁶Orlando B. Quevedo, “The Asian Context of Vocation”: *Asian Vocations Symposium: Asian Vocations today*, (Thailand: Bangkok, Dec 2007), 10.

to seminaries and houses of religious formation, their family background, and their genuine motivations.” He adds:

This is especially true when in Asian culture priestly and religious life is generally seen as a step upward in the social and even economic scale, a step into the culture of the higher middle class. Would there be, therefore, an innate aspiration in applicants for the higher economic, social, and cultural world that priestly and religious consecration implies? What implications would this have on the Asian vision of priesthood as servant leadership, and of religious life as authentic prophecy in an increasingly economic world?¹⁷

In reality, it is not easy to recognize those who desires to serve God from those who are simply looking for their own self-interest. Many young men come for a discernment of vocations, but they cannot clearly distinguish their desire to serve God from their desire to get a respectable status in Vietnamese society. They may come with a dream that by entering religious life, they could advance in their education. Their social economic condition could be improved. This dream in itself is not bad. However, not being challenged or remained unchanged these dreams do not align accordingly with the dream of following Jesus or in the practice of the evangelical counsels in following Jesus. Facing economic pressures, young people may come to religious life as a way to seek material security, to find for comfort of their life, or to look for a better social position. Here, we realize a lack of spiritual intentions.

Furthermore, in considering religious life, many young people tend to be attracted by apostolic missions and ministries rather than by spirituality. Then, to learn about a religious order, they raise questions such as: what are this religious order’s works? How do I prepare myself for the works of the congregation? As indicated, religious life today

¹⁷All quotations in this paragraph is cited from this source: Orlando B. Quevedo, “The Asian Context of Vocation”: *Asian Vocations Symposium: Asian Vocations today*, (Thailand: Bangkok, Dec 2007), 10.

seem to have focus more on outward activities or social involvement than spiritual depth. Therefore, they may pay more attention to requirements to fulfill ministries than a general invitation for religious life as a call from God. Unintentionally, instead of promoting vocation, they are advertising their works and missions. This can motivate young people to seek religious life in the same manner of choosing a job, which is suitable with their abilities and talents, and finding an opportunity for self-assertion.¹⁸ Similarly, the Society of Jesus has been considered as highly educated. Thus, people entered with high hopes to study abroad. These opportunities seem highly attractive for young people for the wrong reasons. Understandably, so since Vietnam has only recently become an active market for exported labor. Thus, some young men come to the Society of Jesus to find an opportunity to go abroad. They need deeper and more authentic reasons for religious life than external attractions.

In addition, the seed dishonesty is sown deep in Vietnam, thus has become a serious issue in education and formation. The root of this issue comes from harsh political and social conditions. Due to a long war and the harsh policies of a communist government, people have become dishonest in their interactions with government officials and with one another in order to survive.¹⁹ This disease has greatly affected the youth and our candidates. To avoid jeopardizing their chance to enter the Society of Jesus, candidates may dishonestly share their desires and motivation with their formators as well as hide their problems since they badly want to be accepted. Perhaps they consider a religious life a job that can get them a high position, security, or respect from

¹⁸Nguyễn Thế Truyền, O.P., “Những Thách Thức Của Việc Đào Tạo Ôn Gọi,”

¹⁹Đaminh Đinh Viết Tiên, O.P., “Hệ Sinh Thái Của Đời Tu,” (The Atmosphere of Religious Life) <https://www.mtgthuduc.net/index/he-sinh-thai-cua-doi-tu/>

people. Therefore, the challenge for a discernment of vocation is how to help them be honest with themselves to reflect on and discern about their desires and motivations for religious life, then introduce them to the meaning and values of religious life. How can this discernment help them open to God's call rather than focusing on their own will?

The next challenge is related to a lack of freedom in the process of discernment of vocations. In Vietnam, there are cultural and social traditions that create pressure on desires, election of vocation, and the decision of young men and women who are discerning vocations. Candidates usually receive strong support from their parents, their spiritual family, and benefactors. They can face pressure to become a priest or a religious from members of their spiritual family and even their biological family. They want to enter religious life because they want to please their spiritual father and/or their parents. They strive to remain in religious life because of their debt of gratitude to the benefactors. This pressure makes them lose their freedom to elect and to make good decisions for their lives.

Besides that, the prejudices and stereotype against people who leave religious life have been combined to create a strong pressure for young persons who are considering it. Especially in the countryside, where most of the candidates come from, their neighbors will look down upon and behave disrespectfully towards those who "give up" their religious life as well as their family, no matter what their reasons are. Therefore, many candidates do not dare to change their election while they are in the process of a discernment of vocations even if they realize that God calls them to turn to a better way of life. These cultural and social pressures challenge discernment of vocations because

they influence the inner freedom of the candidates to respond to God's call. Precariously, under this pressure, they may lose their true vocation and meaning of life as well.

These impacts of economic, social, and cultural factors on young people can be opportunities for development. They may however, also be challenges for choosing and deciding to follow a better direction in life. The challenges for discernment of vocation involve what is affecting the motivations and freedom of young people. We cannot condemn these challenges. Rather, awareness of them may help us better understand the context from which vocations come. This will be helpful for understanding the youth and helping them become self-aware. A discernment of vocation needs to help young people be aware of their identity in terms of who they are and who they want to become. This is an invitation for reflection on the candidates' deepest desires. By interpreting challenges that come from the external influences of society and culture, we can point to even deeper levels of challenge for the discernment of vocation. This is an issue of eliciting authentic desires. Candidates desire to join religious life, to enter the Society of Jesus. However, they should also consider what is affecting their desires and if their desire is also God's desire for them.

Conclusion

The harvests of religious vocation in Vietnam are rich, yet formators are scarced. The Church is growing and bearing witness to the Good News so that the Kingdom of God can spread to every corner of the country. There are many opportunities for development of the Church and for laborers in her missionary works. There are many youth who sincerely desire to serve God and their neighbors in the vineyard through religious life. However, they are facing challenges both from society and culture and

from internal confusion and tension. We are aware of these opportunities and challenges, and we seek a better way of accompanying the youth in general, and especially our candidates, in discerning God's will for them.

Sometimes, people may feel that it is not easy to experience God in this present world. There are many attractions to pull them away from God. How could people experience God at a greater depth? How do they realize the movement of God in their lives? Who is God in their own experience? All these foundational inquiries on the one hand guide people to reflect on their lives, so to understand their identity in their relationship with God. On the other, God continues laboring in the world and inviting people to collaborate with Him. The following chapter will be a historical reflection on desire in its relation to vocation that great mystics in the history of Christian Spirituality have explored. A discernment of vocation means a conversation between God's desire for humanity and human desire for God.

CHAPTER TWO:
DISCERNMENT OF VOCATION:

A Conversation between God's Desire and the Desire of Humanity

Introduction

The history of salvation is embedded in the history of human beings in which God's call for human beings is continuously voiced in different ways. God is calling us to fulfill our human vocation to be God's children and to become members of the Body of Christ, the only Son of God, as our Savior. Throughout history, there are generous women and men offer their lives to become disciples of Jesus to share His mission, in order to collaborate with Him and respond to His desire. That is experiences of Saint Ignatius of Loyola who heard the voice of Jesus said "Whoever wishes to come with me must labor with me, so that through following me in the pain he or she may follow me also in the glory."²⁰

God speaks to us through our desire and we can respond to God's call through our desire for God and for what God wills us to be and to do. Desire plays an important role in our spiritual life, especially in relation to our vocation whether it is a human vocation, Christian vocation, or religious vocation. Our purpose is to become human beings and turn back to God. God is calling all human beings to be holy. "Desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops

²⁰Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises: A Translation and Commentary by George E. Ganss, SJ* (St Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), 54.

searching for.”²¹ In our journey, God accompanies human beings, drawing them to God by God’s love and grace. This is a starting point to study desire and its relationship to vocation through which we can discover a foundation that will support my thesis on the role of desire in Ignatian spirituality and its meaning in helping a discernment of vocation. This leads us back to the origins, in terms of revelation and faith, which are Scriptures and Traditions, in order to discover humans’ desire for God and their response to God’s call.

To discuss the relationship between desire and vocation, it is helpful to apply a mix of historical and anthropological approaches. In revelation and through faith, human beings experience God’s call and then respond to this call. Historically, on the basis of Scripture and Tradition, human vocation and the meaning of desire emerge from the relationship between God and people. Therefore, the metaphor for the discernment of God’s call is that of a conversation between God’s desire and human. This paper will address those who are listening for the call of God but wondering if they can hear God’s voice in their desires.

In this chapter, I will focus on the history of salvation on which the history of Christian spirituality is founded so that people can recognize their vocation. First, I will begin my writing with the definition of desire in the context of spirituality, and I will then examine the meaning desire in the Scriptures. Next, I will look at desire through the history of Christian spirituality by focusing on particular figures like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, who through their works help us understand the anthropological meaning of desire. I then select the writings of Gregory of Nyssa, Bernard of Clairvaux,

²¹*Catechism of The Catholic Church* No 27, Second Edit, Trans, United States Catholic Conference, Inc (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, Inc, 1997), 13.

and Teresa of Avila to support the central point of this belief that desire for God involves building an intimate relationship with our beloved who is calling us. Finally, by focusing on Gregory the Great and Catherine of Siena, I will conclude that God's call can be recognized where God's desire and the desires of human beings mingle.

I. The Relationship between God and Humanity

1. Toward Understanding of Desire in Christian Spirituality

Spirituality is understood as “the actualization of the basic human capacity for transcendence... the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.”²² This capacity for transcendence, in various ways, expresses both motivations for life and direction towards the end of life. Its expression in Christian life, on the one hand, is an invitation to go beyond self, toward self-giving by imitating the life of Jesus. On the other hand, one can experience self-transcendence by attracting God's grace to overcome challenges and to raise our goals from earthly values to the ultimate value. In addition, “Christian spirituality as Christian specifies the horizon of ultimate value as the Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ to who Scripture normatively witnesses and who life is communicated to the believer by the Holy Spirit making her or him a child of God.”²³ Therefore, it is also transforming the community. Christians are calling to follow Jesus in building and serving community by receiving and giving, learning and teaching. This allows us build relationship and creates the atmosphere to love from which community can transform closer to the image of the Kingdom of God. This understanding of

²² Sandra M. Schneiders, “Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality.” In *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder, (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 16.

²³Sandra M. Schneiders, “Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality,” 17.

Christian spirituality first, presents the relationship between God and humanity in which God is drawing humanity to God and humanity is yearning for God. Then, from this relationship human beings are invited to be aware of building their relationships with others as brothers and sisters.

In this context of Christian spirituality, Philip Sheldrake explores what desire means, not by giving a definition of desire but by pointing out its role in relation to spiritual life. “Desire is the heart of all spirituality. It is an energy that powers spirituality but, conversely, spirituality is concerned with how people focus desire. Christian spirituality embodies the sense that humanity has a longing that can only be satisfied in God.”²⁴ This understanding of desire resembles the *Catechism’s* teaching about the human desire for God that we mentioned previously. This desire is placed within people to motivate them to collaborate with God’s grace so that they can grow in their capacity for transcendence from temporal values towards eternal values.

This transcendence however is not a single act of work that can be done for a while and then put aside; rather, it is a gradual process that brings people from stage to stage closer to an ultimate goal. While humanity’s deepest desire for God is the foundational direction of Christian life towards God, there are other desires that can either support or be obstacles for one’s journey to God. Besides a yearning for God, people experience a thirst for other things. As one progresses on the spiritual journey, different kinds of desires can be recognized.

²⁴ Philip Sheldrake, “Desire,” in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed., Philip Sheldrake (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 231.

2. Desire in Different Levels of Transcendence

In the history of Christian mysticism, mystics experienced their journey to God in stages from low to high, from distance to closeness. “The threefold path” is often mentioned as stages of spiritual development on this journey. This threefold path includes purification, illumination, and union.²⁵ Based on that, Richard of St. Victor discovered his “four degrees of violent charity.”²⁶ He described a mystical journey to God through four degrees of love. Richard viewed the degrees of charity as wounding, binding, excluding every other thing, and restless desire. He also used another metaphor to explain levels of love as thirst: thirst for God, thirst to go to God, thirst to go into God, and thirst to live as God lives. These different levels of violent love can be understood as different levels of transcendence in the person’s relation to God. The goal of this journey is what Saint Paul experienced, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20).²⁷

To be sure, humans cannot come closer to God without God’s grace. In this relationship, humanity is yearning for God, and God yearns for human beings as well. This idea recalls us of the story in the book of Genesis (Gen 28:10-22). This is Jacob’s vision of a ladder that is connected from earth to heaven. This ladder maybe interpreted as humanity’s desire to climb to God and God’s desire to elevate humanity to God.²⁸ At this point, people can hear the echo of both human yearning—“My soul thirsts for God,

²⁵Bernard McGinn, ed., *The Essential Writing of Christian Mysticism* (New York: The Modern Library, 2006), 150-151.

²⁶Richard of St. Victor, “The Four Degrees of Violent Charity,” trans. in Bernard McGinn, ed., *The Essential Writing of Christian Mysticism* (New York: The Modern Library, 2006), 158.

²⁷ All biblical quotations are taken from “*The Holy Bible, New American Standard Bible*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000) whatever it is.

²⁸Bonaventure, “The Mind’s Journey into God,” trans. in McGinn, ed., *The Essential Writing of Christian Mysticism*, 166.

for the living God” (Ps 42:2)—and God’s voice: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lv 19:2).

The desire for God is not the only desire that people experience in this transcendence and in their spiritual life. There are other desires as well, namely, earthly desires or desires for material things. These things in themselves are neutral, neither good nor evil, but people can distinguish good desires from evil ones depending on which direction these desires lead their lives and how they deal with these desires. Good desires can serve as a stepping-stone to bring people closer to the ultimate value, while evil ones can pull people far away from God.

3. Desire in the Scripture

Scriptures are not only the Word of God to humanity but they also include the human response to God’s words. The sacred books reveal a loving relationship in which partners express themselves to one other in the language of desire, from the depth of their hearts. People can observe a conversation between God and humanity about God’s desire for humanity, the desire of human beings for God, and human desire for other things. The relationship between God and human being means both calling and responding. God calls and humans desire God. This reality is expressed in various images of love, such as between the bride and the bridegroom and between the master and disciples.

God’s desire for humanity is centrally described in the context of a love story in the book of the prophet Hosea. Humanity is symbolized as an unfaithful wife. As the loyal husband, through the prophet Hosea, God says, “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice” (Hos 6:6). God’s will for human beings is steadfast love and life (Hos 6:6; Ez 18:23, 32): “Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God,

rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?” Furthermore, Christian interpreters of the Song of Songs have borrowed the symbol of the relationship of bride and bridegroom to describe the relationship between God and humanity, God and the individual soul, and between Jesus and the Church. “I am my beloved’s, and his desire is for me” (Song 7:10). In response to God’s love and desire, humans in turn desire God. The Psalmist exclaims, “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Ps 42:2). “As the deer longs for fountains of water, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul has thirsted for the strong living God” (Ps 42:1-2). “O God, my God: to you I keep vigil until first light. For you, my soul has thirsted, to you my body, in so many ways, by a deserted land, both in accessible and waterless” (Ps 63:2). Saint Gregory of Nyssa comments on this relationship: “The present enjoyment of God is the starting point for a greater share of his goodness, and it increases our desire for him.”²⁹ This comment becomes foundational to the masters of Christian mysticism whose writings will be discussed later. From another angle related to vocation, people can view their relationship with Jesus in light of discipleship.

In the Christian Bible, specifically John’s Gospel, Jesus shows God’s desire for humanity through His desire for people. “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (Jn 10:10). Similarly in Luke: “I have come to cast a fire upon the earth. And what should I desire, except that it may be kindled?” (Lk 12:49). Jesus wants to share His desire, the desire of God’s plan of salvation for humanity, with those who want to follow Him. Jesus invites others to get in touch with their desires. Quite often, He asks: “What do you want that I should do for you?” (Mk 10:51); “What are you seeking?” (Jn 1:38);

²⁹Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, trans., Casimir McCambley, OCSO (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1987), 50.

and “What do you want?” (Mt 20:21) Similarly, the conversation between the Samaritan woman and Jesus explores the human desire for love, happiness, and a better life. Jesus knew those desires and responds by giving truth that satisfies her thirst. For those who seek the transcendence of ultimate value, Jesus leads by saying, “I am the way, the truth and the life” (Jn 14:12).

Philip Sheldrake quotes the Gospel of Mark, chapter ten, telling three different situations in which people open their desires to Jesus.³⁰ They desire to be good (Mk 10:17 - 22), to be with Jesus (Mk 10:35 – 40), and to be healed (Mk 10:46 – 52). All these desires are good but sometimes obstacles hold people back. Loving other things and seeking earthly values have an effect on one’s desire for God and God’s Kingdom. The last story about the blind beggar inspires us to reflect on desire. Because he was a beggar, Bartimaeus had nothing. Because he was blinded, he saw nothing. Therefore, he intensely desired healing. This desire led to his healing and to becoming a disciple of Jesus as well. Jesus, whom Christian believes is the Son of God, communicates a deep desire for the people, especially those who are poor and marginalized.

God is the Creator and we are God’s creatures. However, God desires to make the relationship between God and humanity a mutual one. In the Hebrew Bible, this mutual relationship was described by using the metaphor of a husband and a wife. In the Christian Bible, Jesus calls His disciples and brings them into a relationship with Him respectfully and freely. God calls and waits for a human response. Yet desires invite other desires. God’s desires ignite desires in God’s creatures. God’s desire for humanity that can be briefly summarized in the call: “Be holy for I am Holy” (Lv 19:2). Human beings

³⁰Philip Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), 13-14.

yearn to connect to God as their response. That is the meaning of a vocation.³¹ God shares with us God's desire for us, which leads us to talk to God about our desires, about the tension between our desire for God and for other things, about our temptations and our need for God's help. This is the conversation about desires. Desire accompanies human beings in their journey of becoming and returning back to God. That is the human vocation, which can be viewed through an anthropological lens according to Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas.

II. Desire and Human Vocation

1. Saint Augustine (354 – 430 CE)

Human desires clarify our identity and our aim in life, which is to become who God is calling us to be. Augustine's anthropological view of desire is related to our identity and the purpose of life, which involve questions related to where humanity comes from, who they are, and where they are going. Augustine sums up his experiences of seeking meaning in life and reflecting on his own desires: "To praise you is the desire of man, a little piece of your creation. You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." (*Confessions* I.1)

Saint Augustine is a man with a restless heart. His heart makes him continue to seek the truth of human life and yearn for the truth of God. His opening prayer in his *Confessions* mentions not only his desire for God but also the relationship between God and humanity. These words of Augustine, on the one hand, declare that humans are creatures who are created in relationship with God. His message is seen as "an

³¹See Arthur Holder, "Vocation" in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Philip Sheldrake (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 638-639.

exclamation of greatness of God and the poverty of the human soul that is restless without the Divine.”³² His concept of the relationship between the Creator and his creatures further deepens his understanding of the Trinity. In his *The Trinity*, he reflects on the idea of the “Imago Dei”—God’s creating humanity in the image of God—as the most significant foundation for understanding the truth about human beings and their vocations: who God desires humans to become. Because they are created in the Image of God, God is calling them to “Be holy for I am Holy” (Lv 19:2). Thus human life is a journey of transcendence toward the ultimate end, God. As Andrew Louth has explained,

As an image it [the soul] is related to its archetype, God, by being derived directly from him and by seeking its fulfillment in him through a longing to return to contemplation of him. The soul’s “restlessness till it rests in” God is part of what is meant by its being an image of God... Augustine seeks to discover the true nature of a human being, and does this by using the doctrine of the trinity already developed in books I – VII as a guide.³³

As a result, the human journey is empowered by the desire to return to God, the origin of all desires. Thus, this journey has its beginning from God and its end in God. Through human experiences, God is reaching out to people and drawing them to look for God. In a dialectical way, human beings become aware of their desire as they are slowly discovering God as the source of the highest desire that animates the hearts of all people.

Desire could be classified in various levels. In the journey of his own life, Augustine experienced desires for earthly values, as he confesses: “At one time in adolescence I was burning to find satisfaction in hellish pleasures. I ran wild in the shadowy jungle of erotic adventures...by pleasing myself and by being ambitious to win

³² Jennifer Hockenbery, “Augustine (354-430): *The Confessions*,” in *Christian Spirituality: The Classics*, ed. Arthur Holder (New York: Routledge, 2010), 40.

³³ Andrew Louth, “Augustine,” in *The Study of Spirituality*, ed. Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, SJ (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 142.

human approval” (*Confessions* II.1). These desires for earthly pleasure are not always bad or evil; he could also say that “the single desire that dominated my search for delight was simply to love and to be loved” (*Confessions* II.2). Humans can experience these desires, and somehow be satisfied, but their hearts are restless in seeking ultimate values until they find rest in God. “I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours” (*Confessions* X.38). “My God, how I burned, how I burned with longing to leave earthly things and fly back to you. I did not know what you were doing with me.” (*Confession* III.8).

As Roland Delattre has observed, “Augustine makes a major distinction between desires directed upward, which he calls *caritas*, or love, and those directed downward, which he calls *cupiditas*, or lust.”³⁴ This is really a conversation that people can hear, not voices of any language, but rather the voice of God’s desire calling humans to become the Image of God and voices of human desire for God. This desire is sometimes disturbed by their desire for other things. Human desires are not merely of negative values because of the affection of sins; rather, they are strengthened by God’s grace. “Grace is for Augustine an attractive power which draws us to God by implanting in us a ‘delight in righteousness.’”³⁵ God endows humanity with an innate desire for God, and then enables them, with divine grace, to satisfy their passion in God alone. Summarizing Augustine’s idea of desire in relation to human vocation, Thomas Martin writes, “The restless heart of Augustine prompted a searching, a commitment to truth and love, an unrelenting desire to

³⁴ Roland A. Delattre, “Desire” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd Edition, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 2308.

³⁵Louth, “Augustine,”144.

engage the mystery of God that unfolded before him, both overwhelming and beckoning him.”³⁶

2. Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225 –1274 CE)

While Saint Augustine presents his ideas of desire, human vocation, and the Image of God by reflecting on human experience, Saint Thomas Aquinas gives an intellectual overview of human desire in relation to its end. In *Summa Contra Gentiles* III.1.63,³⁷ Saint Thomas explains that all human desires are based on the common aim of ultimate happiness that only God can satisfy. To develop his ideas, Aquinas lists four types of desire: desire for the knowledge of truth, desire to manage lower things, desire to enjoy pleasure, and desire for one’s own preservation. In his intellectual way, Aquinas explains the reason for why these desires exist, what desire looks like, and how desire can be satisfied.

The first kind of desire Aquinas mentions is intellectual. This desire is “concerned with the knowledge of truth; indeed, men seek to fulfill this desire by the effort of the contemplative life.” Only in God, who remains as the First and ultimate Truth, can this desire be satisfied. Based on human’s possession of reason, the second type of desire in Aquinas’s list is a “desire to manage lower things; this, men seek to fulfill by the work of the active and civic life.” According to Aquinas, there are ordinate desires and inordinate desires. Ordinate desires occur when a person lets their desire be “enlightened by the divine light.” Inordinate desires occur when people “proud and ambitious” and are “deemed lovers of vainglory.” Inordinate desires for wealth can make a person become

³⁶ Thomas F. Martin, OSA, *Our Restless Heart: The Augustine Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 13.

³⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 272-275.

illiberal and unjust. Aquinas adds, “There is even a third desire of man, which is common to him and the other animals, to enjoy pleasures. Men chiefly seek after this in the voluptuous life, and they become intemperate and incontinent through immoderation in regard to it.” This is a desire for satisfaction of biological needs. Finally, Aquinas notes that there is a natural desire common to all beings: desire for their own preservation. “There is, moreover, a natural desire common to all things by which they desire their own preservation... This desire will then be completely satisfied when the blessed attain perfect sempiternity and are safe from all harm.”³⁸ Aquinas begins his concept of desires with ultimate happiness and ends it with preservation. Only God can satisfy both of them.

In Saint Thomas’s presentation of desire, people exist within a hierarchy, which can help readers understand desire in relation to their vocation. These hierarchical desires help people understand who a human being is. Humans are creatures of God who have intellectual ability, reason, and physical existence. With these qualities, they can enter into relationships with God, with the world, including other people, animals and the rest of God’s creatures. Creatures are organized in a hierarchical order. If people look at this order from the lowest creature to the highest, it presents a journey of human life that comes from God at the beginning of its existence, passes through the world, and then returns toward its last end, God, to share in ultimate happiness. “All creatures have a natural desire for God insofar as they tend towards Him as their last end.”³⁹ This natural desire for God can become a way of fulfilling ones identity in accordance with God’s

³⁸ All quotations in this paragraph is cited from the same source: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 272-275.

³⁹ Jean Porter, “Desire for God: Ground of the Moral Life in Aquinas,” *Theological Studies* 47 (1986): 48.

will. “Creatures are said to have a natural desire for God insofar as they have a natural tendency to be themselves, understood as terms of His communication of goodness.

According to Thomas, each creature returns to God by becoming ever more completely itself.”⁴⁰ We live out the purpose of life that God created within us. With their desires, each person is invited to fulfill their vocation, to become who God wants him or her to become.

Briefly, the understanding of desire in the works of Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas serves as a foundation for human vocation as a journey coming from God and returning back to God. Both Augustine and Aquinas view desire for God as human nature that God planted in their heart when God created them to give direction for their lives toward God as their end. The human journey involves starting from God, passing through this world, and going back to God. Based on this philosophical foundation, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas give us an anthropology of human desires. Both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas view human desire through Christian anthropology. Desires direct us to turn to God as our last end.

III. Desire for God: Building the Relationship with Our Beloved

In their writings, Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335 – 394), Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 – 1153), and Teresa of Avila (1515 – 1582) discuss the human desire for God and how it can help people develop a relationship with God. For Gregory of Nyssa and Bernard of Clairvaux, the Song of Songs presents the most beautiful picture of the loving relationship between God and the soul through which the symbol of the bride’s erotic desire. The bride’s waiting, and yearning for her beloved represents the human desire for God. In her books the *Interior Castle* and *The Way of Perfection*, Saint Teresa of Avila

⁴⁰ Porter, “Desire for God: Ground of the Moral Life in Aquinas,” 52.

shares her own experiences of yearning for God. These mystics describe desire for God by exploring significant characteristics that are necessary for a person to develop intimacy with God.

1. Desire for God is increasing more and more

Desire for God urges humans to seek God, so that God alone can satisfy their desire. In his commentary on the Song of Songs, Saint Gregory of Nyssa explains the spiritual experience of those who yearn for God: “they never cease to desire, but every enjoyment of God they turn into the kindling of a still more intense desire... The more it enjoys his beauty, the more its desire for him increases.”⁴¹ This experience of God makes the soul joyful and satisfied by “the present enjoyment of God.” However, this enjoyment of God creates an even stronger desire for God. God is beckoning the soul by God’s sweetness and love. In the language of Saint Teresa of Avila, God is calling those who thirst for God to come closer to God for God will give them water. “When God satisfies the thirst, the greatest favor he can grant the soul is to leave in it this same need – and a greater one – to drink the water again... For this water doesn’t impede the fire, though it is fire’s contrary, but rather makes the fire increase.”⁴² Using the metaphor of oil instead of water, Bernard of Clairvaux writes that the thirsty soul is like oil:

I think that even when it has found him the soul will not cease to seek him. God is sought not on foot but by desire. And the happy discovery of what is desired does not end desire but extends it. The consummation of joy does not consume desire, does it? Rather, it is oil poured on flames, which itself catches fire. Thus it is. Joy will be fulfilled. But there will be no end to desire, and so no end of seeking.⁴³

⁴¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 50-51.

⁴² Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2000), 204-205.

⁴³ Bernard of Clairvaux, “Sermon 84 on the Song of Songs,” in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, trans. G. R. Evans (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 274-275.

For those who are seeking for God, God will give them enjoyment, happiness in order to guide them to come closer. Desire for God preserves people and deepens people's relationship with God. It is not because of the human act of yearning for God, but rather because God acts first.

2. God acts first to make people desire God

Human beings can desire God because it is God who draws them. In the previous quote, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux notes that "God is sought not on foot but by desire." For him, the soul can seek God because it has first been sought by God. "Every soul among you which is seeking God will know that he has gone before and sought you before you sought him."⁴⁴ In the *Song of Songs*, this is the experience of the bride who desires and seeks her bridegroom. Bernard explains, "She was first sought, and first loved, and that it is because of this that she seeks and loves."⁴⁵ In her writing about different experiences of God, Teresa of Avila confirms, "He makes it [the soul] desire Him vehemently by certain delicate means the soul itself does not understand."⁴⁶ For Teresa, God stirs the desires of humanity by giving them "spiritual delight, consolation, and tenderness."⁴⁷ God did not create human beings to leave them alone but continues to care for them and works within their hearts and through their desires so that they can seek God and go back to God more closely, even closer. Because God is the fount of life, Gregory of Nyssa writes, "The virgin soul longs to approach the fount of the spiritual life.

⁴⁴Bernard of Clairvaux, "Sermon 84 on the Song of Songs," 275.

⁴⁵Bernard of Clairvaux, "Sermon 84 on the Song of Songs," 276.

⁴⁶ Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 115.

⁴⁷Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, 172.

That fount is the mouth of the Bridegroom, whence ‘the words of eternal life’ mentioned in Jn7:37, ‘if anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.’”⁴⁸ Humans are thirsting for God and for eternal life because God desires that human beings have happiness and everlasting life; therefore, God acts in various ways to make people desire Him and respond to God’s will.

3. Love creates desire for God

In his commentary on the Song of Songs, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux uses marvelous words to describe the soul as the beloved of God. In her longing for God and calling God, Bernard writes, “She calls him with the freedom we associate not with a Lord but with a lover.”⁴⁹ It is in love that God desires human beings. It is in love that people desire God and seek God as well. “The love is the cause of the seeking, and the seeking is the fruit of the love, and it is its guarantee. You are loved, so that you may not think that you are sought so as to be punished; you are sought, so that you may not complain that you are loved in vain.”⁵⁰ The love of God inspires the soul to respond to God through her desire to love Him with all her heart and soul. Gregory of Nyssa explains, “The soul as a Bride designates him whom she loves with her entire ‘heart and soul...and strength’ (Mk 12:30).”⁵¹ That love, according to Teresa of Avila’s experience, is binding the soul to God, not only in positive feelings such as enjoyment and happiness but also in surrender to God, to be with God and desire to share what God is doing, even

⁴⁸Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 51.

⁴⁹Bernard of Clairvaux, “Sermon 74 on the Song of Songs,” 254.

⁵⁰Bernard of Clairvaux, “Sermon 84 on the Song of Songs,” 276.

⁵¹Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, Excerpts in *The Song of Songs Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators*, ed. Richard A. Norris, The Church’s Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 134.

the suffering that Jesus has been borne because of human sins. That God desires for us to suffer must be understood as the call to share one's suffering with Jesus and to follow Him as a response to His love for us. Because of love, God desires to offer God's life to humans so that humans can in turn desire to offer their lives, including acceptance of one's sufferings in response to God's love.

Desire for God can be seen as a foundation for vocation. Love is the center of the relationship between God and human beings. And love makes this relationship become mutual. Because of love, first, God desires and seeks human beings; therefore human beings can desire God and seek God. The more humans desire God, the more they realize God's love for them and the more their desire for God is kindled. To respond to God's desire, humans offer their striving and their suffering, which is called being "wounded by love."

Through the works of Saints Gregory of Nyssa, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Teresa of Avila, we recognize that the desire for God brings them into the most intimate relationship with God. From this foundation arises their awareness of God's desire, how God feels about them. There is not a mere intellectual notion but a deep understanding arising through prayer and the practice of contemplation. In considering this desire for God, we understand a dynamic through which people are inspired to move from self-centeredness to God-centeredness, to be compassionate with God, have faith, hope, and love God. This creates an opportunity for people to intensely reflect on their own desires for God and to listen to God's desire for them.

IV. Vocation, Where God's Desire and the Desire of the Person Mingle

1. Saint Gregory the Great (c. 540 – 604 CE)

Saint Gregory the Great, one of the great mystics said, “By contemplation we rise to the love of God; by preaching we return to the service of our neighbor.”⁵² In talking about his own life, Gregory mentions the connection between the contemplative life of a monk and the pastoral duty of a pope. How can he harmonize both of these? In his writing to pastors, Gregory expresses his own way of life, in which he is seeking for God in “contemplation with a perfection of heart” and at the same time “is occupied in serving others.”⁵³ His desire for God therefore will meet God's desire for the welfare of souls. This meeting place is attained through compunction and love.

Through what Gregory says about desire relating to compunction, people can feel how strong God's desire for humans is. This is an experience of recognizing that God loves them but their response to God is too little. “Since she [the soul] cannot fully perceive him in this life, she contemplates his grandeur and feels compunction on the basis of this love for him. Now this compunction, which occurs through charity, which is enkindled from desire, resembles a kiss.”⁵⁴ This is the kiss that the bride desires from her beloved in the Song of Songs (1:1a), and also the kiss of the woman who kisses the feet of Jesus (Lk 7:36-50), whose loving devotion Gregory prefers even to the attitude of a pastor who does good works.⁵⁵ Humans are able to desire God because of God's love.

⁵²*Moralia* VI.37,56, as quoted by R.A. Markus in *Gregory the Great and His World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 23.

⁵³*Moralia* V.4, 5, as quoted in Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World*, 24.

⁵⁴Gregory the Great, *On The Song of Songs*, trans. Mark DelCogliano (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 122.

⁵⁵Gregory the Great, *On The Song of Songs*, 123.

“By ‘pouring out himself out as ointment’ he has made the ‘young girls ardent in the love of him’ because by renewing them he has made their souls burn with desire for him.”⁵⁶ At this point, Gregory interprets the young girls’ ardor as the desire of the newly baptized for God. God’s desire for human “renewing” and salvation is planted in the human desire for God, who is speaking to us from and through our desire. Thomas L. Humphries writes:

God also speaks to humans by visiting them personally. This speech is not conveyed in propositions with syntax, but in power and impulse, resulting in compunction and contemplation. Gregory calls it silent or internal speech, speech conveyed in desire.⁵⁷

In his continuing discussion of Gregory’s ascetic pneumatology, Humphries mentions that the Holy Spirit is speaking within a person to “transform his thoughts and desires, making him compassionate towards others, sorry for sins, and desirous of God.”⁵⁸ That is, the Holy Spirit creates a point of mingling between human desire and God’s desire. As a monk, Gregory discovers this action of the Spirit through Christian asceticism and contemplation. “Christian asceticism is a dialogue of desire in which the Holy Spirit forms virtues and reforms human thoughts and desires so that the ascetic can respond with appropriate desire.”⁵⁹ This is a model of religious vocation where God first calls people and then guides them in ways to respond to this call.

⁵⁶Gregory the Great, *On The Song of Songs*, 125.

⁵⁷Thomas L. Humphries, *Ascetic Pneumatology from John Cassian to Gregory the Great* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 173.

⁵⁸ Humphries, *Ascetic Pneumatology*, 177.

⁵⁹ Humphries, *Ascetic Pneumatology*, 177.

A religious vocation according to St. Gregory can be summarized this way: “In contemplation they will already desire highest things; but they will also show compassion for the necessities of the infirm.”⁶⁰ On the one hand, it is an invitation to the person to share their experiences of God that they have in contemplation with others so that others can learn how to experience of God, or at least can kindle their desire for God. On the other hand, by contemplating God a person can recognize God’s desire for humans, then return to do what God wishes them to do, by serving their brothers and sisters.

2. Saint Catherine of Siena (1347–1380 CE)

A soul rises up, restless with tremendous desire for God’s honor and the salvation of souls....But there is no way she can so savor and be enlightened by this truth as in continual humble prayer...following in the footsteps of Christ crucified, and through desire and affection and the union of love he makes of her another himself..⁶¹

This quotation from Saint Catherine suggests that the soul experiences two different attractions. On the one hand, it experiences its “desire for God’s honor and the salvation of souls,” which come together. On the other hand, it experiences union with God in prayer by following the footprints of Christ crucified. This experience brings the soul up to the height of its desire, where God “makes of her another himself.” This must be the fullest meaning for all Christian vocations of discipleship, because Jesus’ disciples are called not only to follow His footprints but also to become one with Him. In this experience of conversation, the human desire for God and for the sake of souls encounters God’s desire for humanity. At this moment, according to Catherine, the soul

⁶⁰*Book of Pastoral Rule* II.5, as quoted in Arthur Holder, “Gregory the Great: Book of Pastoral Rule,” in *Christian Spirituality: The Classics*, ed. Arthur Holder (New York: Routledge, 2010), 78.

⁶¹Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, trans by Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 25.

can hear Jesus' voice saying, "If you will love me and keep my word, I will show myself to you, and you will be one thing with me and I with you."⁶²

In this dialogue between the soul and God, God reveals to Catherine that the more she desires to bear suffering and pain for the salvation of souls, the more she shows that she loves God. The increase of love causes increase of suffering.⁶³ This statement is true for God and true for those who follow Jesus as well. God loves humans so much that God desires to share God's happiness with them; however, by committing sin, humans separate themselves from God. Therefore, God accepts suffering through the life and passion of Jesus to show God's love to humanity. In a similar way, for those who love Jesus and desire to follow Him, the more they love Jesus, the more they feel suffering because, on the one hand, they feel sorry for their own sins and the sins of other people and, on the other hand, they desire to imitate Jesus, sympathize with Him, and bear the cross with Him. Because of love, God sacrifices God's only Son to us. Then, because of responding love, for those who desire to follow the footprints of Jesus, God calls them to sacrifice their lives for God and for the sake of their brothers and sisters. Love for God, love for self, and love for others converge in God's will for everyone, which we can observe from the greatest Commandment: "You shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself" (Lk 10:27). Catherine shares her experience of this love in *The Dialogue*:

Blessed with this unitive love she reaches out in loving charity to the whole world's need for salvation. But beyond a general love for all people she sets her

⁶²Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 25.

⁶³Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 33.

eye on the specific needs of her neighbors and comes to the aid of those nearest her according to the graces I have given her for ministry.⁶⁴

Desire for God leads people to union with God and to imitate God. The highest point of contemplation is bringing people into union with God, not only to realize the presence of God but also to offer themselves to God's love. The conversation between God's desire and human desire seems to be between the two partners, but the third one (the neighbor) is implicit in the content of the conversation. People can hear the echo of God's voice in the words of Scripture: "Whenever you did this for one of the least important of these followers of mine, you did for me" (Mt 25:40). "If we say we love God but hate others, we are liars" (1Jn 5:20). These verses show God's desire for those who desire to serve God through serving their neighbors, and for those who desire to follow Jesus by collaborating with Him in His laboring in the world.

Conclusion

At the beginning, when God created humanity, God gave them the priceless gift of being in the Image of God, in order to lead them as they travel to their final end, which is to fulfill their journey of life in God. From this gift, put in the depths of their heart as the desire for God, people receive strength and motivation for their journey toward the ultimate value. With this "likeness of God," humanity has the ability to desire God, enter into a loving relationship with God, and discover who God wants them to become.

This chapter is a presentation of the conversation between God's desire for humanity and humanity's desire for God as the discernment of vocation. The Scriptures reveals to us that God is our beloved. We are loved and called to become Jesus's disciples so that we may learn how to live our identity by becoming "the Image of God."

⁶⁴Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 37.

From the masters of Christian mysticism, we know that “desire itself becomes the means of communication and communion between God and Christians.”⁶⁵ Desire makes our heart become restless in seeking God until we can rest in God. It makes us aware that we have come from God and are going back to God. In this journey back to God, desire helps build the personal and intimate relationship with God based on love and God’s grace, kindling our desire for God more and more. This loving relationship creates an intimate atmosphere for the dialogue between God and the soul in which there is a moment in which our human desire for God encounters God’s desire for us and for all humanity. That is the moment of recognizing our vocation. God’s call meets a human response.

In relation to vocation, desire for God does not mean people are seeking satisfaction from consolation, happiness, and beauty as things given by God’s grace. Rather, “the enjoyment of desire is not only present in its fulfillment, but in the striving relationship with that which one desires.”⁶⁶ The more human beings desire to “know” God, the more they are brought into the mystery of God’s love. The meaning and purpose of human life is related to human desire. In between the starting point of human life and its ending is vocation. As Frederick Buechner has written, “The place God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”⁶⁷

Discernment of vocation involves discerning what God’s calling for a person. The will of God can be realized at the place where one’s deepest desire is mingled with God’s

⁶⁵ Humphries, *Ascetic Pneumatology*, 177.

⁶⁶ Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Desire, Gift, and Recognition: Christology and Postmodern Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 38.

⁶⁷ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), 118-19.

desire. To discern one's vocation, people are invited not only to reflect on their experiences of seeking and loving God, but also to be aware of how God is seeking them and loving them. People cannot totally clarify God's desire for them, but they are able to become more aware of their human desires and what is affecting them. In the Ignatian tradition, which I will present in the next chapter the awareness of human desires serves an important tool for the discernment of vocation. More specifically, in the Contemplation of "The Call of the King," Ignatius recommend to us that God's desire is to bring the whole world into the glory of God, to which this investigation now turns its attention.

CHAPTER THREE:

“TO ASK GOD, OUR LORD FOR WHAT I WANT AND DESIRE”⁶⁸:

The Role of Desire in Ignatian Spirituality

Introduction

“In spirituality we talk about ‘holy’ desires, desires which orient a person towards God and which are considered, therefore, to be graces from him.”⁶⁹ This understanding of spirituality is based on the Christian faith, in which we believe that God creates human beings and brings them into their existence. Then God also gives them a desire to keep them in a relationship with God. Through their desires, people can hear God’s voice calling them to come closer to God and to become whom God desires them to be. In their desires, people also get delight and motivation to respond to God’s call. This call implies a vocation, which comes from God because it is God’s grace. To be aware of one’s vocation, one needs a process of discernment in order to hear the voice of God in their desires because the desire for God is not the only one that people experience.

In the writings of Saint Ignatius of Loyola (1491 – 1556), people can both find out how the saint deals with his desires and learn from his own experiences how God guides him through these desires. His entire life could be considered as a journey of discernment of his desires for “preparing and disposing our soul to rid itself of all its disordered affections and then, after their removal, of seeking and finding God’s will in the ordering

⁶⁸Saint Ignatius of Loyola, “The Spiritual Exercises 48,” in *The Spiritual Exercises: A Translation and Commentary by George E. Ganss, SJ* (St Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), 40.

⁶⁹ E. Edward Kinerk, S.J., “Eliciting Great Desires: Their Place in the Spirituality of the Society of Jesus,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 16, no. 5 (November 1984), 1.

of our life for the salvation of our soul” (*The Spiritual Exercises* 1).⁷⁰ Thus, desires play an essential role in Ignatian spirituality. To make “an initial synthesis of his spirituality,” Father George E. Ganss writes: “Ignatius developed an intense desire to be associated intimately with Christ and to cooperate with him in achieving God’s plan of creation, redemption, and spiritual growth as that plan was slowly unfolding in the history of salvation. Ignatius desired to play the role offered to him by God in that ongoing history.”⁷¹ Ignatius’ desires are knitted with his vocation: discerning a more authentic way to follow Christ. According to Ignatius, being with Christ is the grace of God (*Autobiography* 96). Therefore, for those who are doing the Spiritual Exercises and desiring to find a way to follow Christ, Ignatius suggests that they should begin by “ask[ing] God for what I want and desire.”

In this chapter, I will reread Ignatius’ experiences as recorded in the *Autobiography*⁷² specifically from perspective of his desires and specifically from two events in his life: Loyola and Jerusalem. I will review what Ignatius desired or mentioned about desire in order to understand how his desires slowly helped him to orient his life, how such desire led him first to realize God’s will, and then, yearning to serve God and to help souls, in following the footsteps of Christ. Then, from these insights, I will

⁷⁰All quotations from the Spiritual Exercises are taken from: Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises: A Translation and Commentary* by George E. Ganss, SJ (St Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992).

⁷¹ George E. Ganss, S.J., “General Introduction,” in *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, ed, George E. Ganss, S.J., (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 11.

⁷²All quotations from the *Autobiography* are taken from: Luis Goncalves da Camara, *Reminiscences* (or *Autobiography of Ignatius Loyola*), in *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, trans and annot. with intro. by Joseph A. Munitiz and Philip Edean, (London: Penguin Books, 2004).

summarize the role of desire in Ignatian spirituality in three dimensions: its direction for life; its needs for the discernment of vocation; and its giving energy for spiritual life.

I. Desires in Ignatius' Life

1. The Autobiography

The *Autobiography* of Saint Ignatius was written to share with his fellow Jesuits “how the Lord 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” (*Autobiography* 3). This book is not merely a kind of hagiography in which readers can learn about holy lives and the virtues of saints; rather it tells the journey of Ignatius' vocation as an example of Jesuit vocation. In his later years, (1553 and 1555), Ignatius told his own account of his life to his fellows: Jerónimo Nadal and Luis Goncalves da Câmara. Subsequently, Câmara recorded all that Ignatius had shared with him. This is the story about how God made him become what later is known as companion of Jesus.

As a noun, the term “desire” appears eighteen times in the *Autobiography*.⁷³ Father E. Edward Kinerk, S.J., summarized the use of these references as follows: “Except for the initial desire to win fame and a reference to the absence of a desire to eat meat, it always indicated some affective stirring to do a holy deed.”⁷⁴ As such, most of Ignatius' desires are holy desires. When people consider a desire as intention and thought, its presence in the *Autobiography* is not merely 18 times but amounts to stream

⁷³ In the footnote of the article “Eliciting Great Desires: Their Place in the Spirituality of the Society of Jesus”, father Edward Kinerk pointed out 18 times the word “desire” was used in the *Autobiography* in numbers: 1, 9, 10 twice, 11, 12 twice, 14, 15, 27, 45, 46, 47 twice, 55, 71 twice, 79.

⁷⁴ Kinerk, S.J., “Eliciting Great Desires: Their Place in the Spirituality of the Society of Jesus” 6.

of desires. This flow of Ignatius' desires includes three main categories: desire to imitate the saints, desire to serve God and imitate Christ, and finally desire to help souls.

Curiously, Ignatius' story did not start with these desires, but desires of a different sort: vainglory. Ignatius did not say much about these desires. However, John M. McManamon, S.J., gives an interpretation of the *Autobiography* as "The Acta as Mirror of Vainglory." He explains Ignatius' account as a journey of healing and conversion from vainglory. This vice not only characterizes twenty-six years of Ignatius' youth but also follows him to the end of life. In order to know about Ignatius' "holy desires" after his conversion that Father Kinerk mentioned, McManamon shows that Saint Ignatius had been continuously fighting with his vainglory by discernment and by the guidance of God.⁷⁵

2. Vainglory: Desire to Gain Honor

Before his conversion, Ignatius' heart was burning with zeal for earthly honors. His family background and childhood education created an atmosphere for the emergence of this desire. Saint Ignatius was born in 1491 in the noble Loyola family in the Basque country of northern Spain. He was trained for a life of service in the royal court. In this upbringing, his characteristics were formed in such a way that "desire for worldly praise and glory, eagerness to distinguish himself by daring or even reckless deeds against odds, and tenacity in reaching an objective once he had decided upon it."⁷⁶ These desires led him to become a knight to serve an earthly king and noble ladies. So, "up until the age of twenty-six he was a man given up to the vanities of the world, and his delight used to be

⁷⁵ John M. McManamon, S.J., *The Text and Contexts of Ignatius Loyola's "Autobiography"* (New York: Fordham University press, 2013), 11-51.

⁷⁶ George E. Ganss, "General Introduction," in *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, 14.

in the exercise of arms, with a great and vain desire to gain honour” (*Autobiography*1). Later on, in the *Spiritual Exercises*, he indicated these desires as “disordered affections” of the soul (Sp. Ex. 1, 21), since they oriented him towards earthly things. Therefore, there are two types of desire: authentic and inauthentic. In discernment, these desires can be categorized as good or evil, depending on whether they: support or obstruct people on their journey of seeking God.

It was not easy for Ignatius to deal with these desires. It is a long process. During the time of recovery at Loyola after being wounded in a battle against the French army at Pamplona, this kind of desire often came to his mind. These thoughts gave him instant delight and joy, but he felt dry, sad, and tired in the long-run (*Autobiography* 6-8).

Nevertheless, becoming aware of these desires and their affect in discernment became key moments for his conversion. Reflection on different desires gave to Ignatius different inner reactions that helped 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.”

(*Autobiography*, 8) At this time, for Ignatius, discernment is simply awareness of self and distinction between good and evil. “He uses an overly simplistic, purely emotional criterion at this stage in his journey: if it ‘feels good,’ it comes from God.”⁷⁷ This is just a starting point of his conversion. There was still a long process for him to learn about God’s will.

In brief, until his conversion at Loyola, Ignatius spent energy on desire and commitment to serve a human king in order to gain honor and glory for himself. Then after that, he began to desire to spend his entire life to serve Christ, the eternal King.

⁷⁷John M. McManamon, S.J., *The Text and Contexts of Ignatius Loyola’s “Autobiography,”* 20.

However, this was not a quick and smooth conversion. God patiently accompanied him, even through his vainglory, to help him in changing and growing in the desire for service of Christ, and not even desire but in his actions.

3. Loyola: Desire to Imitate the Saints

At the important turning point of Ignatius' life in Loyola, reading books sparked thoughts and desires, which lead him into discernment and conversion. Ignatius read *The Golden Legend* by the thirteenth-century Dominican, Jacopo da Voragine and the *Life of Christ* by the Carthusian, Ludolph of Saxony. These books raised within him the desire to imitate saints, which gave him deep consolation and happiness. The desire for the following the example of saints began to transform his life.

The desires to imitate the saints were occurring to him...with the grace of God, to do it as they had done it. All he wanted to do was journey 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. And now he was coming to forget his past thoughts with these holy desires he was having. (*Autobiography* 9)

This short passage shows how important desires are for Ignatius. There was a big change in his desires, moving from desires for vainglory to desires for self-denial and for God's glory. This is the moment of conversion from self-centeredness to God-centeredness. This conversion led Ignatius toward yearning for perfection. On the one hand, he desired repentance from a disordered life to doing well by asceticism and practicing penance in imitating the saints. On the other hand, he imitated the saints in gratitude for God's love and mercy by his intention to go to Jerusalem to commit his life in service of God and helping souls. Ignatius was aware of these holy desires by discernment and by receiving confirmation from God (*Autobiography* 10). These desires

both helped him deal with his past thoughts, especially with matters of the flesh and directed him to go forth on a new journey to serve God and to help souls.

Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle gives us a pause to rethink about Ignatius' desire for imitation of saints through her comment: "Yet Loyola's mental vacillation between the secular and the sacred remains under the sway of the chivalric ideal."⁷⁸ Desire to do what saints did can be an inspiration from God which is drawing Ignatius' attention to good and spiritual matters. Nevertheless, it is possible for an affection of vainglory on his desire. Ignatius started his desire for imitation of saints by questions "How would it be, if I did this which St. Francis did, and this which St. Dominic did?" and reasoned, "St. Francis did this, so I must do it; St. Dominic did this, so I must do it." (*Autobiography*, 7) The chivalric ideal may still guide him not only to do what the saints did but to do even more. Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle suggests:

Going barefoot to Jerusalem on a vegetarian diet in imitation of saintly rigors is not necessarily progress beyond going shod to Pamplona beefed up in imitation of knightly rigors. Loyola has not yet experienced a true conversion of interior disposition. He is merely exchanging one set of appearances and allegiances for another. Whether in arms or in asceticism, his values remain agonistic. His object is to be observed and praised for excellence: vainglory.⁷⁹

We can understand this passage in a way of not reducing the value of Ignatius' good desires but rather helping us to understand how challenged Ignatius was by vainglory.⁸⁰ In Ignatius' life, vainglory was not only desire for earthly honor but also

⁷⁸Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Loyola's Acts: The Rhetoric of the Self*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 36.

⁷⁹ Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Loyola's Acts: The Rhetoric of the Self*, 38.

⁸⁰What does it mean vainglory? In *Loyola's acts*, 26-27, Boyle describes "honor" as what are depended on "what people will say"; and "glory was the attribute of adventurous, and between two paths the valorous knight would choose the more difficult."

affecting his good desires. It remained in his desires even as spiritual vainglory, which gave him a twist from his knightly rigors to saintly rigors.

4. Desire to Serve God and Imitate Christ

Along with his desire to imitate saints, Ignatius' desire to serve God and Christ came from books he had read. First, in the *Golden Legend*, the saints were described as “the knights of God who did resplendent deeds in the service of the eternal prince, Christ Jesus, whose ever victorious banner these knights were following.”⁸¹ As an ambitious soldier, Ignatius now desired to do what the saints did, and even more than that. He desired to be an outstanding knight of Christ. Second, Ludolph's *Life of Christ*, in which “contained the whole mystery of Christ, God's plan of salvation unfolding in a historical sequence,”⁸² gave to Ignatius knowledge about the life of Christ which enriched the content of his desire for serving Christ and his love of Christ. During his time at Manresa, Ignatius read a third book, the *Imitation of Christ*, in which “regard to many of its chief thrusts such as contempt of worldly values, docility to grace, and familiarity with God, deeply influenced him for the rest of his life.”⁸³ This was his favorite book of devotion that he read every day. It helped him nourish his desire to follow Christ and imitate Him. Christ became the center of Ignatius' life. This is another transformation from self-determination to discipleship. In this time, according to Ignatius, God became his Master and he was God's disciple (*Autobiography* 27). The following paragraph is a summary of

⁸¹ Ganss, “General Introduction,” in *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, 16.

⁸² Ganss, “General Introduction,” 19.

⁸³ Ganss, “General Introduction,” 28.

Ignatius' preparation to enter time of training at Manresa, which in Jesuit formation today is equivalent to novitiate.

When Ignatius left Loyola in 1522 to take up his new life of total dedication, his spirituality was very generous and determined, but also inexperienced, uneducated, and indiscreet. Its thought content, however, was already oriented, far more than he was aware, toward prayerfully intimate cooperation with Christ and his redemptive plan. Henceforth he would desire more and more to order all things toward God's greater glory, in accordance with that divine plan for the spiritual growth and eventual self-fulfillment of free human beings in the joy of the beatific vision.⁸⁴

5. Desire to Help Souls

The idea "helping souls" came to Ignatius for the first time when he was at Manresa. During this time, "besides his seven hours of prayer, he was occupying himself in helping some souls who would come and find him there in spiritual matters" (*Autobiography* 26). His spiritual experiences kindled within him a desire to help souls. After that, in Jerusalem, Ignatius discovered in himself a desire of spending his entire life in the Holy Land helping souls (*Autobiography* 45). However, this desire did not materialize. God did not want him to remain at Jerusalem but guided him in another way, by engaging in study in order to work for the salvation of souls (*Autobiography* 50). God did not want Ignatius to work in Jerusalem but in other places both geographical such as Salamanca, Paris, Rome..., and ministerial such as studying, serving in hospitals, and teaching catechism for poorly educated persons. Later, he shared this desire with his companions in Paris, and it became the central topic of their deliberation in 1539. They still had the intention to go to Jerusalem. However, once again, God did not desire for them to go to Jerusalem but rather God guided them to found the Society of Jesus so that

⁸⁴Ganss, "General Introduction," 26.

under the service of the vicar of Christ, they may be sent to “wherever he judged to be more for the glory of God and the good of souls”(Autobiography 85).

6. Jerusalem: Desire to Do God’s Will

From Loyola to Jerusalem, Ignatius desired to imitate Christ, to help souls. Though this motivation seems holy and authentic, it is still his own, rooted in his way of doing things. It would take the Franciscan authority to reject Ignatius’ ideas of staying the rest of his life in the Holy Land for Ignatius to come to his true and authentic desire (Autobiography, 45-50). We know that helping souls seems the main apostolic ideal for Ignatius and later, for his companions. “But his stay in Jerusalem will provoke a new crisis, another crossroad in his spiritual journey. Ignatius decides to act on his consolation and remain in Jerusalem for the rest of his life, visiting the holy places and helping souls. In requesting permission to stay, Ignatius reveals only his pious desire, not the apostolic one.”⁸⁵ McManamon points out here an important moment of Ignatius’ discernment. On the one hand, according to McManamon’s explanation, “The Spirit visits Ignatius only when he descends from the Mount and a Syrian Christian apprehends him. The grace that the Spirit confers in that moment proves abundant. Because Ignatius steps out of the Lord’s footprints and descends from the Lord’s Mount of Glory, he acknowledges the lordship of Jesus in his heart and can begin a life in service to the Lord.”⁸⁶ Ignatius himself comments: “Once the said pilgrim had understood that it was God’s will he should not be in Jerusalem, he had constantly had with him thoughts about what was to be done. In the end he was inclining more towards studying for a time in order to be able

⁸⁵McManamon, S.J, *The Text and Contexts of Ignatius Loyola’s “Autobiography,”* 42.

⁸⁶McManamon, S.J, *The Text and Contexts of Ignatius Loyola’s “Autobiography,”* 43.

to help souls.” (*Autobiography*, 50) This is really the process of discernment of God’s will and spiritual development. If at Loyola, through discernment of desires Ignatius made the turning point from inordinate desires to good desires, then now at Jerusalem, he discerned and made decision to give up his “pious desire” to follow the authentic one. If at Loyola, Ignatius was aware of what was from God by “feelings good,” here, he realized the will of God through the troubles in giving up his own desires in order to obey the Church’s authority as obedience of God. From his desires, Ignatius was directed to come closer to God, not by human effort but by God’s will.

In short, Ignatius believed and confirmed that God guided him throughout his life to enter God’s plan of salvation, in which through Ignatius’ desires God converted him from a knight of an earthly king to become a knight who serves Christ and His Spouse—the Church. By a long process of discernment, he discarded some desires and followed others as the direction of his life. He reordered the disordered desires of his past in accordance with God’s will. He followed the desire for perfection by imitating what the saints did with a burning heart to serve God and an enthusiastic spirit to help souls. He followed the desire to serve God and imitate Christ, which became the core of the Spiritual Exercises and of Ignatian spirituality. Finally, he followed the desire to serve the good of souls, which is the foundation for his ministry and the apostolic vision of the Society of Jesus.

With all these experiences of Ignatius, we come to understand more clearly what he means by suggesting in the Spiritual Exercises, “ask for what I want and desire.” It presupposes that “what I want and desire” is an authentic desire that according to Ignatius’ journey, directed and energized his life to grow closer to God. These authentic

desires moved Ignatius to holy deeds because he believed that they came from the grace of God. Sometimes, Ignatius did not follow all the desires he met. He desired to become a Carthusian or to enter a decadent religious community to reform it, but he did not follow through.⁸⁷ God gave him good desires but also taught him how to discern these desires so that he could both recognize what is vainglory to be given up and follow God's will. Discernment of desires guided Ignatius in the process of conversion and in discovering the call of God for him, a Jesuit vocation.

Ignatius longs to be the object of God's desire; in fact, in faith, he knows himself to be just that and to follow[ing] that desire is the meaning of his life. The one who is desired longs to be possessed by the one who desires and understands their lives as being fully for the other and understandable only in relation to that desire of the other. So the purpose of his life becomes to do that which is God's desire, or God's will, as he puts it. The desire of the subject who desires becomes identical with the desires of the one desired, so Ignatius very vividly, again and again expresses this throughout the Exercises in the sense that he continually returns to wanting to do what it is that his Divine Majesty desire of him.⁸⁸

This passage points out another desire of Ignatius, a desire that his desires be at one with the desire of God. This desire looks like the converging point of the three desires we previously mentioned. After his conversion, all Ignatius' desires progressively directed him toward fulfilling God's will. However, this was not merely his own effort, but rather God's grace.

II. The Significant Dimensions of Desire in Ignatian Spirituality

1. Direction of Life

It is clear that Ignatius' desires could take his life in two completely different directions. His desires reminded him about the way in which as a knight, he was

⁸⁷Kinerk, S.J., "Eliciting Great Desires: Their Place in the Spirituality of the Society of Jesus" 6.

⁸⁸Thomas McGrath, "The Place of Desire in the Spiritual Exercises," in *The Way Supplement* (Spring 1993), 29.

committing himself to earthly fame and honors, while his second option invited him to go forth to imitate Christ in serving God and helping souls. Through discernment and by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Ignatius decided to begin his journey to follow Jesus Christ. This way became the direction for Ignatian spirituality and for those who practice the Spiritual Exercises as well. In the Exercises there are dynamics of desire that bring people closer to God through Jesus, who is “the Way.” These dynamics reveal that in the midst of people’s everyday lives, God is talking to them about God’s desires for them.

At the very beginning of his book, Saint Ignatius noted, “the Spiritual Exercises is given to any means of preparing and disposing our soul to rid itself of all its disordered affections and then, after their removal, of seeking and finding God’s will in the ordering of our life for the salvation of our soul” (Sp. Ex. 1). Father Michael Ivens explains this statement as Ignatius’ invitation for people to join the journey that leads them to God by “turning from” their disordered affections in order to make a “turning to” a new direction of life. Ivens notes, “What is stressed here is that one makes the Exercises in order to find a direction in one’s life.”⁸⁹ What is the direction they should follow? This direction is no one else’s, except the way of God, to follow Jesus, as a means to respond to God’s will. However, based on his experience, Ignatius suggests that people be aware of their present condition: the “ground” where they are standing and the direction in which they are moving. This awareness helps them realize the “disordered affections” which are drawing them away from the direction of God. To find a new direction for life that God desires for them, people should “turn from” their own direction and “turn to” God’s direction so that they can move closer and closer toward Jesus.

⁸⁹Michael Ivens, *Understanding The Spiritual Exercises*, (Herefordshire, England: Gracewing and Surrey, England: Iñigo Enterprises, 1998), 3.

Father David Fleming gives us a more concrete understanding of the Exercises by exploring its dynamics. He writes, “What characterizes every element in the *Exercises* is the sense of movement—described more fully as a movement forward as well as a movement in depth in a personal commitment to Jesus Christ.”⁹⁰ This is an invitation to move closer toward Jesus and to grow in an intimate personal relationship with Him. This “closer” and “deeper” relationship with Jesus Christ is developed gradually through the four weeks of the Exercises that correspond to four movements. The first week is the movement from self-centeredness to God-centeredness. The second week invites us to move from self-determination to discipleship. The third week is a deeper movement that leads us from sympathy to compassion. Finally, the fourth week is an invitation to live the movement from faith to hope. These dynamics, invite people to practice what John the Baptist claimed, “He must become more important while I become less important” (Jn 3:30).

We are exploring how desire can give us a sense of direction in life. This involves the experiences of Saint Ignatius and issues an invitation for those who make the Spiritual Exercises. Regarding the dynamism of desire, James L. Connor S.J notes:

The dynamism of desire means that every human being is a creature, that every one of you has been set in motion toward your end, that the action of the Holy Spirit follows the bent of your being, orienting you along the natural path of desire. And so, you respond to the need you feel in the depth of your being, where each of you experiences the deepest movement of a created being, and the whole natural thrust of a human being.⁹¹

⁹⁰ David L. Fleming, “The Ignatian Spiritual Exercises: Understanding a Dynamic” in David L. Fleming, ed., *Note On The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, The Best of the Review 1 (St. Louis, MO: Review for Religious, 1996), 2.

⁹¹ James L. Connor, *The Dynamism of Desire: Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J., On The Spiritual Exercises Of Saint Ignatius Of Loyola* (Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2006), 41.

This point of view is founded on the basic doctrines of Christian anthropology. God created human beings and placed within them a deepest desire that is oriented toward God as the end of their lives.⁹² The Holy Spirit continues to guide them as they journey through life and through their desires to help them become aware of their identity as children of God and disciples of Jesus. Saint Ignatius followed these doctrines and shared his experiences through the Spiritual Exercises and the guidelines for discernment. Desire, therefore, is a grace of God, and it is sanctified by the Holy Spirit to lead to a direction in life. The Holy Spirit was guiding Jesus, who went to the desert to pray and fast in order to recognize His mission, and then He do you was sent to preach the Good News. The Holy Spirit guided Ignatius progressive discernment and his desires so that his desire to imitate the saints became a strong desire to imitate Jesus Christ and commit his life to follow Him. In the discernment of vocation, the same Holy Spirit is directing young men today through their desires.

Candidates who are discerning vocations bring with them a desire to enter religious life. There could be many things that affect this desire. For example, one time when I directed a young man who came for discernment of vocation. He came to the Jesuits because he wanted to become a priest in order to give the Spiritual Exercises like father Anthony S.J. He also shared with me his desire to become a missionary like Saint Francis Xavier. Those are wonderful desires. After few months of accompanying him in the candidacy program, I learned that he also wanted to become a Jesuit because his spiritual father, who is a diocesan priest, held the Jesuits in high regard and wanted him to join the Society. His spiritual father also encouraged him that with his intellectual

⁹²*Catechism of The Catholic Church* No 27.

ability he could fulfill the requirements of Jesuit formation. This ideal drew him to become a Jesuit. The young man, however, was not yet aware the source of his desires. He was attracted by the reputation of the Society of Jesus. He did not yet know much about a religious vocation or about Jesuit spirituality. Discernment directors accompany such young men to help them reflect on their desires and to find out what factors may be influencing them. What are their deep desires? Awareness of their desires can help them find a clear direction in life. This process invites them to reflect back on their life history to discover what desires they had during their journey. The first and most important question that should be asked: How did this desire for a religious life form, emerge, and manifest itself in my life? This question helps candidates review important events and special experiences in their lives from which arose their desire for religious life. This reflection helps them recognize the action of the Holy Spirit in their desires and in their daily lives.

We are talking about a serious desire that would make people give their total effort and pay attention to nourish it. This must be the deepest desire for life, which can make people attentive to movements that help them invest in the realization of this desire. This deepest desire gradually draws them in a particular direction so that their ideal becomes a lifestyle. Can the desire to follow Jesus be their deepest desire? It is possible to realize God's call from the point where God's desire and human desires are mingled, but for sure, vocation is not merely based on human desire. In this sense, discernment of vocation actually is the discernment of desires.

2. Discernment of Desires

We feel and experience human desires, and those desires are integrated with God's desire at some deep level within us. There are various ways to explain this experience. First, God creates us, and our deepest desire comes from the grace of God. "The soul is the place where God's desire and my desires intersect."⁹³ Second, the Holy Spirit is working on us through our desires. Third, we are imitating God in desiring. Rene Girard suggests, "All desires imitates the desire of an Other." James L. Connor explains "mimetic desire," which is:

I desire what some Other desires. I see an Other desiring some thing or some one and I desire what the Other desires...desire is born in me when I see an Other desiring. In other words, mimetic desire structures the 'me' that I construct through my choices. I construct myself by desiring what I see an Other desiring. I come to be me by imitating some Other; I construct 'me' by imitating some Other.⁹⁴

Connor makes a distinction between "the good mimetic desire and bad mimetic desire." Bad mimetic desire is sinful and violent because that is the desire of evil that desires what God has. Therefore, it will fight to get what God has. That desire makes God into a rival. That is a selfish desire. In our desires, we can imitate evil by fighting to get what we want. "My desire is awakened by a rival who makes me feel in opposition to an Other because the Other desires what I want. I structure my 'me' as one who is against."⁹⁵ Ignatius calls this disordered affection or inordinate desire, which are obstacles in our way to God and following Jesus. A good mimetic desire is the desire of

⁹³ Mark E. Thibodeaux, *God's Voice Within: The Ignatian Way to Discover God's Will*, (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2010), 167.

⁹⁴ James L. Connor, *The Dynamism of Desire: Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J., On The Spiritual Exercises Of Saint Ignatius Of Loyola*, 48.

⁹⁵ Connor, *The Dynamism of Desire*, 49.

Jesus, who said, “I do everything which I see my Father do” (Jn 5:19). That is authentic mimetic desire, which treats God as the model. We are encouraged to have this kind of desire, to imitate Jesus, to desire what He desired and “putting on the mind of Christ or the ability to see and make decisions the way in which Jesus sees and makes decisions.”⁹⁶

Discerning to find authentic desire is a long and complex process and needs God’s accompaniment and training. In the Gospel sometimes, Jesus asked people about their desires. He asked the two men following him “what are you seeking?” (Jn 1:38). In answer, they desired to know Jesus and to be with Him. It took them a long journey following Him to know who their Master is. In another situation, a mother with her two sons came to meet Jesus. He asked her “what do you want?” (Mt 20:21). They wanted to join with Jesus. Jesus questioned if they could share His cup of passion. With those who have come for discerning their vocation, directors ask them the same questions and have received various answers that express their desires for religious life. They want to know more about God and about living a religious life. They want to help the poor. They want to become missionaries. They want to imitate a particular saint or a person, and so on. All of these are very good reasons. However, they need more time in prayer to reflect and discern carefully about their desires in order to answer not merely to their directors but also to respond to Jesus and to explore Jesus’ desire for them. They are invited to “come and see” where Jesus is living and working in their lives and in this world. They are invited to share “the cup” with Jesus. It is necessary to review the guidelines of Saint Ignatius concerning discernment to be aware of which desires they have and which desires they support as they continue.

⁹⁶ Fleming, “The Ignatian Spiritual Exercises: Understanding a Dynamic,” 3.

According to Saint Ignatius, our lives are affected not only by the guidance of the Holy Spirit but also by disordered affections, which can disorder affect our entire life. Within our deepest desire, the holy desire that God places within us, our life is set in the order and direction that move towards God. Along this way, there are both “good spirits” and “evil spirits” that can affect us. The good spirits support us to move forward while the evil ones put obstacles in our way. In the situation of the Candidate House, the good spirits can encourage candidates diligently to practice prayer and virtue, generously serve community and share life with others. It inspires their desires for life-giving. In contrast, the evil spirits can draw them to a selfish way and desire for self-interest only. Therefore, in the realm of desires, there are both good desires, which are aligned with our holy desire for God, and inordinate desires, which make us inattentive or neglect the goal of our lives. We need to discern to realize our deepest desire, good desires, and inordinate desires.

Ignatius notes that the evil spirit can “brings good and holy thoughts attractive to such an upright soul and then strives little by little to get his own way, by enticing the soul over to his own hidden deceits and evil intentions” (Sp. Ex. 332). The candidates share their good desires for religious life but they need to be aware of the purpose for those desires. Do they desire such good things for the sake of others or for the glory of God? Or could it be that those good desires maybe for the sake of their own interest or due to the expectations of others?

In “the Principle and Foundation,” Ignatius counsels, “On our own part we ought not to seek health rather than sickness, wealth rather than poverty, honor rather than dishonor, along life rather than a short one, and so on in all other matters. Rather, we

ought to desire and choose only that which is more conducive to the end for which we are created” (Sp. Ex. 23). We are called to be holy. That is our fundamental vocation. Everything is created for us. All God’s creatures are good, but not all of them are necessary for the sake of our souls and for our vocation. Therefore, we need to be indifferent in order to be free to desire and choose what is better for us so that it helps us to be holy. According to this principle, if we are aware of our desires we can realize the signs of God’s will for us. Our desires should direct us to our purpose in life. Candidates have the desire for joining the Society of Jesus. Can this desire open them to become holy, to come closer to God? For Jesuits, we are urged to view even the Society of Jesus as just a means, as a way that brings us closer to God.

Furthermore, in the meditation “the Call of the King,” Saint Ignatius invites people to a deeper discernment of their desires. “My will is to conquer the whole world and all my enemies, and thus to enter into the glory of my Father. Therefore, whoever wishes to come with me must labor with me, so that through following me in the pain he or she may follow me also in the glory.” (Sp. Ex. 95) The center point for this discernment is Christ and His desires. People should reflect on their desires in accordance with the invitation of Christ. If they intend to follow Him, they must collaborate with Him in His mission, to be with Him whatever the situation, in pain or in glory. This call of Christ becomes the foundational criterion of an authentic desire to follow Him. Personal love for Jesus Christ is one of ten distinguishing characteristics of Jesuits.⁹⁷ To develop this characteristic, Ignatius suggests people ask for the grace “that I may not be deaf to His call, but prompt and diligent to accomplish His most holy will” (Sp. Ex. 91),

⁹⁷Avery Dulles, “What Distinguishes Jesuits,” January 15, 2007, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2007/01/15/what-distinguishes-jesuits>

and “an intimate knowledge of our Lord who became human for me, that I may love him more intensely and follow him more closely”(Sp. Ex. 104).

Many of our candidates desire to follow Jesus, to serve God and God’s brothers and sisters through consecrated vocations, but they do not know how to utilize this desire. Until they experience Jesus and His mission of mercy, they may not know how to name the experience of a “call” by God. There is a fire and holy longing that motivates young people to go forward, beyond their duties of daily life to do something more. Their desires may not be directed to respond to Jesus’ desire but somehow, they can be on the way to a call or just accidentally in sync with “the real desire.” This is a complicated issue, and confusion arises about motivations because they are not clear. Candidates need guidance in finding their purpose in life. It all comes back to a very basic feature: Jesus and His model for life. The discernment of vocation introduces Jesus and His call to the candidates.

When young men come to the discernment of vocation, they desire good things: for their parents, for their spiritual family, and for their own interest. These desires can be the tip of the iceberg of their deeper desires that are not easily apparent to others. Tradition, culture, and relationships can be factors that affect desires. Pressures of society, expectations from others, or prejudices can be obstacles to deeper desires. Desire moves people to search for the greater meaning of life. The deepest desire would move them to find a meaningful way of life in which they can spend what they own, such as their ability, knowledge, and talents, to serve and to make their lives fruitful.

Directors will not discriminate between religious vocations and other vocations. Rather, we help people discern which way God desires them to live and make their lives

be meaningful. For all Christians, the answer lies in imitating Jesus. There are various ways to follow Jesus, and among them is the religious life. When a person desires to follow Jesus in religious life, his desires must correspond to what Jesus desires and to what is necessary for living this vocation. For instance, the evangelical counsels can help a person become more like Jesus so that he or she can find greater meaning in their life. If they are not led to religious life, people can always find other ways to follow Jesus in responding to God's will. Their purpose is to find another meaning of God's will. We believe that God places within us the deepest desire to search for this ultimate meaning.

People also need to pay attention to what is affecting their desire. Motivations can come from the outside but they can also emerge from within. From the outside, one's desire can be affected by tradition, family, economy, and society. For example, a man desires to become a priest in order to have a better life because he is born in a poor family and because he witnessed difficulties and suffered much. Such a man may desire to join religious life in order to have more opportunities. From within, he may discover psychological motivations during the process of human development. A desire to become a priest can emerge during the time of adolescence because he wanted to be like his parish priest. With the help of theories of human development, we can understand the reason and meaning for those desires that were formed in a particular context and how they can affect the process of psychological and spiritual development. With this help, we may understand how the deepest desire of a candidate was formed.

The deepest desire for religious vocation must be a desire to follow Jesus. This desire accompanies directs people in their present situation while continuing to lead them into the future. Therefore, awareness of this desire helps one become aware of one's

identity and who one would like to be. This gives a person the motivation to act and to live. In a discernment of vocation, people are invited to become aware of their desires and to channel them to discover their deepest desire, from which they also realize the desire of God for the world and for their lives. Susan Rakoczy notes, “desire is powerful, for it is the energy which moves us towards God and the doing of the will of God; at the same time, it can enslave when it is directed to anything other than God. In discernment, the power of desire and the purification of desire meet.”⁹⁸

Susan Rakoczy suggests a process for discernment of desires that includes four steps. The first step should be on “focusing desire” to become aware of what we are desiring, in that our desires either move us toward God or away from God. In the second step, she invites us to analyze our desires by reflecting on our experiences in order to “recognize the direction and intentionality of these desires.” After that, we are invited to “judge the intentionality of desire,” how powerful desires are in affecting our life. Hence we purify inordinate desires in prayer and reflection so that we can realize and respond to the will of God. Finally, the fourth step involves making a choice under the guidance of the Holy Spirit which will embody the deepest desire in our heart, “to know, love, and serve God and all that God loves.”⁹⁹ This process of discernment can help us understand and confirm that desires can direct our life, affect our life, and can collaborate with the grace of the Holy Spirit to help us discover and do God’s will. These are helpful techniques that can be applied to discernment of vocation as well as to improve discernment in daily life.

⁹⁸Susan Rakoczy, “Discernment and Desire” in *The Way* 39 no 3, Jul 1999, (Campion Hall, Oxford: the British Jesuits), 279.

⁹⁹Rakoczy, “Discernment and Desire,” 279.

Philip Sheldrake emphasizes that, “the key to discernment is not a technique but the focused intensity of our desire. It is a matter of attitude and relationships—the quality of how we relate to our own self, to other people, to created reality, and to God.”¹⁰⁰ This is an important reminder for discernment of vocation. On the one hand, the “intensity of our desire” can be a sense of love directed to others. On the other hand, vocation is God’s call to become who one is and to share the mission of Christ by committing oneself in building loving relationships and serving others. Who I am and who I am urged to become, can open to us a new horizon to discover our deepest desire where we may have the possibility of getting in touch with God’s desire. That desire gives people the energy to direct their life and find meaning in their lives.

3. Energizing of Spiritual Life

Mark E. Thibodeaux believes that in the mind of Ignatius, “God dwells within our desires. Desires are not evil, but rather they are one of God’s primary instruments of communicating to us.”¹⁰¹ Desire is the grace of God inflamed within our deepest self to move us towards God. We desire a meaningful life but sometimes in inordinate ways. Therefore, our desires need to be channeled into the healthy way that God desires. The Holy Spirit is working through our natural desires to sanctify and transform them so that they are in harmony with God’s desire from which we get the energy for our ultimate purpose that furthers all human values and goes beyond our own self. Desire accompanies us in spiritual growth. “The energy of desire shapes our lives, leading us to

¹⁰⁰Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires*, 84.

¹⁰¹ Mark E. Thibodeaux, *God’s Voice Within: The Ignatian Way to Discover God’s Will*, 167.

make choices which have consequences for ourselves and others.”¹⁰² Desire and its energy, according to Ignatius, can be aligned with the grace of God so that he suggests that people pray before each of the Exercises, “ask for what I want and desire.”

He requests: “joy with Christ rejoicing”(SE 48), “tears, pain, and suffering with Christ suffering”(SE 48), “an ever increasing and intense sorrow and tears for my sins”(SE 56), “a deep awareness of the pain suffered by the damned”(SE 65), “that I may not be deaf to His call, but prompt and diligent to accomplish His most holy will”(SE 91), “an intimate knowledge of our Lord”(SE 104 and 113), “a knowledge of the deceits of the evil chieftain... and a knowledge of the true life...the grace to imitate Him”(SE 139), “the grace that I may be received under His standard”(SE 147), “the grace to choose what is for the greatest glory of His Divine Majesty”(SE 152), “sorrow, affliction, and confusion because the Lord is going to His passion on account of my sin”(SE 193), “that I may feel intense joy and gladness for the great glory and joy of Christ our Lord (SE 221), “a deep knowledge of the many blessings I have received”(SE 233).¹⁰³

This long list of graces helps to understand what Ignatius means when he says “ask for what I want and desire.” This helps us to understand the intentions of Ignatius and to have a holistic view of the direction in which the Exercises are leading people. According to Father E. Edward Kinerk, S.J., “Ignatius is not mandating desires but eliciting them.”¹⁰⁴ What Ignatius suggests in general is that all those who do the Exercises pay attention to wants and desires, because “these can be said to correspond ultimately to the desires of the Spirit in the heart of every believer.”¹⁰⁵ They are for persons in prayer to help them get into the direction and movement of the Exercises: to go forward and deepen their personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We “ask for what I want and desire” so that our desires can deepen and be sanctified in order to meet Jesus’

¹⁰²Rakoczy, “Discernment and Desire”, 269.

¹⁰³ Harvey D. Egan. S.J., *The Spiritual Exercises And The Ignatian Mystical Horizon* (St Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1976), 74.

¹⁰⁴ Kinerk, S.J., “Eliciting Great Desires: Their Place in the Spirituality of the Society of Jesus,” 11.

¹⁰⁵Ivens, *Understanding The Spiritual Exercises*, 48.

desire (Sp. Ex. 95). We can then be converted from a sinner to a child of God and become a friend and disciple of Jesus.

We can arrange “what I want and desire” in the Spiritual Exercises into three main groups in accordance with the movement of the Spiritual Exercises. First, we ask for what I want and desire so that we are aware of what Jesus has done for us to help us remove our inordinate affections and to order our lives according to God’s will. That is the desire to move from self-centeredness to God-centeredness. Second, we ask for the grace to listen to the call of Jesus and respond to that call. That is the desire to be changed from self-determination to be a disciple of Jesus. Finally, we ask for “an intimate knowledge” of Jesus to know Him interiorly, to love Him intensely, and to follow Him closely. This desire helps people move from sympathy with Jesus to compassion with Him, to become His partner in mission. We can realize here, in these graces we ask for, a dynamism that is similar to the traditional process of spiritual growth: conversion, illumination, commitment, and union.

In a discernment of vocation, people on the one hand desire to clearly realize God’s will for them, so that they can respond to God. On the other hand, they bring with them their raw, insufficiently discerned desires. During time of candidacy, they are invited to become more aware of the order and the direction of their lives and, more importantly, which type of desire is driving them. “Discernment is all about recognizing the energies that drive us. What kind of energy is being released?... He [Ignatius] was suggesting that all desires and feelings have a direction. Some desires are life-giving and others are ultimately destructive”¹⁰⁶ Previously, the first part of this paper discussed discriminating

¹⁰⁶ Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires*, 90.

between healthy and inordinate desires. In modern terms, perhaps, we are learning about “wants and desires.” These are graces that we should ask for. Empowered by these graces, we are enabled to recognize the authenticity and direction of our desires, so to reorder them and make our decisions accordingly. In this section, we are focusing on what Ignatius suggests as “want and desire.” They are graces that we should ask for. Those graces can give us the energy to reorder our desires and make decisions in our lives. It may be helpful if we categorize “what I want and desire” into separate topics to discover how they energize our desires, our direction, and therefore help us make decisions in life.

Only after having recognized and become aware of their true desires, can the candidates continue the discernment process. Upon entering religious life, they come to simply discover the requirements which religious life demands as well as to learn more about their capability, whether they are suitable for religious life or not. Subsequently, the candidates are invited to further explore their desires to “understand Jesus interiorly, love Him intimately and follow Him closely.” This is the foundation that helps them discern their desires for religious life, especially that of the Society of Jesus, since the Jesuit vocation, first and foremost, is based on building a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. “To discern our personal vocation, we have to realize that it is a calling from a friend, who is Jesus.”¹⁰⁷ Moving to this new phase of discernment, there is a new standard by which the candidates’ desires are measured. The desire suggested here, either healthy or inordinate, spiritual or material, is determined by one’s relationship to Jesus. Thus, after moving away from self-centeredness to God-centeredness, the candidate is called to move deeper from self-determination to become Christ’s disciple.

¹⁰⁷ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit: To Young People and To The Entire People of God*, 132.

In the *Spiritual Exercises*, “the Call of the King” marks the beginning of this new phase, which is often known as the Second Week. The Call of the King (Sp. Ex. 91 - 98), the two Standards (Sp. Ex. 136 - 147), the three classes of persons (Sp. Ex. 149 - 157), and the Three kinds of humility (Sp. Ex. 165 - 167) serve as spiritual steps assisting the person in their progression of falling in love with the Lord. This journey stimulates people to desire what Jesus desires, to embody what He has done, and to relate Jesus’ desires to their lives. This moves people into intimacy with Jesus. People are moved to know Jesus and desire to be known by Him as their beloved. Jesus is not merely the King who calls them to collaborate with Him, but He is their companion who is the powerful God who emptied Himself, becoming poor and doing all things, even suffering and dying for them. Therefore, in responding to His love they may ask, “What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ, what ought I to do for Christ?” (Sp. Ex. 53) These questions can make them desire to follow Jesus and imitate Him. These desires can help them more clearly hear God’s voice.

The desire for a religious vocation is a desire to change from self-centeredness to Jesus-centeredness. This invites the discernor to choose to follow Jesus and to be His friend. When the desire for intimacy with Jesus is great, it moves one to desire to do more than what one has done in responding to Jesus’ love, “for the Greater Glory of God.” This is Jesus’ mission, which was fulfilled through the way of self-emptiness and surrender to the Father’s will. Jesus invites young people to commit their lives to share this mission with Him. “Ask for what I want and desire” aims to help people bring about their deepest desire and transform it to be one with Jesus’ desire. They begin with their desires that

give energy to move them toward God, and then they ask for the energy of Jesus' desire that will draw them to become friends of Jesus, to become His disciples.

Conclusion

Saint Ignatius was a man of desire. As a young soldier, his heart burned with seeking earthly honors, but God wanted him to become a knight to fight under the banner of Christ. His conversion began with his discernment of desires, in which God helped him overcome his old desires and kindled in him a new desire to follow example of the saints in serving God and following Christ. Then from this new life, these healthy desires sparked within him a yearning to help souls. Ignatius affirmed that these authentic desires, on the one hand, were the grace of God. On the other hand, they were nourished by discernment. God gradually taught him that he could be more and more familiar with God's will, which was guiding him through his desires.

In Ignatian discernment and in the Spiritual Exercises, desire can play various roles: seeking direction toward God, sorting matters for discernment, and energizing our movement toward God. "To discern is not, on the one hand, purely a deeper level of awareness or, on the other, merely a decision. It ultimately involves moving further towards a harmonious relationship with who we most genuinely are as people."¹⁰⁸ Discernment means to know who we are and who God is. Discernment leads to making an election, it "means choosing a way of life that is single-heartedly concerned with the purpose for which I am created (who I am) and with desiring to serve God (my sense of ultimate meaning)."¹⁰⁹ "What are you looking for?" "What is it you want?" "Where are you going?" Without desires, we cannot answer these questions. The great and deepest

¹⁰⁸Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires*, 82.

¹⁰⁹Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires*, 93.

desire is where we can encounter God's desire, which can direct us towards God as the goal of our lives. However, the direction in our lives is woven with various desires, including healthy ones, which are aligned with God's desire, and inordinate ones, which are affected by "disordered affections." We need to discern our desires to find the will of God in a place where human desire and God's desire intersect. Ignatius suggests that we "ask for what I want and desire" to help us place our desires into God's desire, to ask the Holy Spirit to transform our desires so that they may become one with Jesus' desire, which is our vocation. Therefore, without desire: human desires and God's desire, we cannot engage in discernment. Ignatian discernment would be impossible without desire.

The discernment of vocation involves discerning God's calling for a person. The will of God can be realized at the place where the human's deepest desire meets God's desire. We cannot totally clarify God's desire for us, but it is possible to be more aware of human desires and what affects them. Deepest desires can play different roles: a direction for life, a motivation for life, and forming meaning-making in life. These roles are useful in the process of discernment to deal with issues of unclear motivations for the desire for religious life. To know about one's vocation is to know about God's desire and one's deepest desire. That deepest desire is to be aware and to be transformed to be aligned in alignment with Jesus' desire.

CHAPTER FOUR:

“THE CALL OF THE KING” (Sp. Ex. 95):

A Model for Discerning Religious Vocation

Introduction

There are different ways to lead the discernment of vocation. Sometimes people are tempted to guide this discernment based on certain human qualities such as talents, education, abilities, or psychology. In such cases, they may reduce the power of desires, especially the desire for God and the holy desire that God places within us. This can lead to a critical evaluation of participants rather than helping them discern and listen to God’s call. To avoid this temptation, as vocation promoters for the Vietnamese Jesuit Province and directors who guide young men in discerning their vocations, we seek to clarify our understanding of vocation, of discernment and therefore, of discernment of vocation. In addition, the requirements for high quality vocations are considered in both selecting of candidates and forming them in religious life. Good motivations could serve as signs for a better quality vocation. How can we learn about good motivations? Motivations can be a mix of human desires and God’s desire for them. “God’s will for us emanates from the point where our desires and God’s desires for us commingle.”¹¹⁰ The discernment of vocation seeks to help young people involves an awareness of both their desires and God’s will for them.

A discernment of vocation creates an atmosphere for candidates to reflect on their personal experiences of God so that they can hear Jesus asking all those who want to follow Him the same question that he asked the two disciples of John the Baptist, “What

¹¹⁰Denis Donoghue, “God’s Will: Where Desires Commingle” in David L. Fleming, ed., *Sharing Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, The Best of the Review 9, (St. Louis, MO: Review for Religious, 2008), 210.

are you looking for?” (Jn 1:38). To discern their vocation, people should pay attention to their desires. However, desire is a large topic that relates to almost every dimension of a human being. In this chapter, I will focus on the kind of desires that relate to one’s vocation, the desires like the ones that Saint Ignatius experienced and that changed his life and began his vocation as a companion of Jesus.

To find a better way for discerning a vocation, we learn from the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius, which offer a particular way to understand and discern vocation. By this I mean, the message of Jesus in “The Call of The King” in the Exercises number 95.¹¹¹ By this message, Ignatius invites those who are following the Exercises to discover Jesus’ call to them and to be aware of their response to Him. This can serve as the foundation for reflection on one’s desire to follow Jesus. It can give a person more inner freedom by focusing on the love of Jesus for them, and therefore, it can be an invitation for the progression of discernment by considering the life of Jesus in their day-to-day activities.

This chapter is an application of Ignatian understanding of desires in the process of discerning a religious vocation. There are two particular moments concerning desires in the life of Ignatius that we can apply to the discernment of a religious vocation, particularly to the Vietnamese Jesuit Candidate House. First, there were moments at Loyola, which helped Ignatius to become aware of the inner movements that were taking place in him. This marks the beginning of his conversion journey, engaging in the dynamic of transformation moving from self-centeredness to God-centeredness. Second, there were times in Jerusalem, where Ignatius was forced to go against his original

¹¹¹Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises: A Translation and Commentary by George E. Ganss, S.J.* (St Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), 54.

intention and come to recognize authentic desire which he learned coming from the “will of God.” Looking from these two specific moment and time, “The Call of The King” can thus serve as a model for a candidate to discern his desire in the vocation of following Jesus, so to serve in His mission.

I will organize this chapter as the exercises for a three days discernment of vocation, including four parts. The first part will introduce to candidates an overview about vocation. This exercise helps them understand what discernment of vocation mean and therefore easier enter the process of discernment. The second part will be the exercises that help them aware of self in accordance with God’s will. This knowledge of self will be a turning point to guide them returns to their relationship with God. The third part directly introduces to them “the Call of the King” to help them focus on what God is calling to them. This will help them pay more attention to God’s desire rather than their desires. Finally, the fourth part is some remarks for a discernment of vocation.

Normally, young people come for discernment of vocation has with them raw desires and some commencement ideas about religious life and spirituality of which congregation they intent to join. They also bring with them an attitude that deciding for their vocation is depended on God Whose decision is done through the directors. This is attitude of the directors as well. They come to direct discernment of vocation, not only the guide young people discover God’s call but also to select vocations for the congregation. However, the earlier duty is easy to be ignored. What is the role of candidates in this discernment? First and foremost, we focus on guiding candidates to discover God’s voice within and how to respond to God’s call. The fifteenth annotation in the Spiritual Exercises is a chosen method for this discernment. We should let God

work immediately with the people. Directors play a role of guiding and create the atmosphere for the encounter between God and candidate.

I. The First Day: Introduction to the Discernment of Vocation

1. Overview: What is Vocation?

Ignatian discernment is a process that directs people towards God in order to do God's will. The most important purpose of a discernment is to help people return to their human vocation as "created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by means of doing this to save their souls" (Sp. Ex. 23). Discernment can help people know themselves by recognizing their disordered affection as what is stirring their heart, knowing the movements of the Holy Spirit in their life, and then knowing their identity as God's will for them.

Vocation means the call to follow Jesus in discipleship.¹¹² It is helpful to clarify this understanding of vocation as people being called to follow Jesus in order to learn how to obey God's will. There are various ways to follow Jesus and to become His disciples either through married life, single life or through religious life. People may think that a discernment of vocation means helping people choose one of these ways of life. This can lead people to confuse "means" and "ends." Actually, discerning a vocation means primarily choosing one's purpose in life, and then a particular way leading toward this goal. Therefore, a vocation is not just for those who desire to enter a religious congregation. Rather it is a call to all Christians.

We recognize the three levels of vocation. The most general vocation for all human beings is the call to seek God, to know God, and to love God. The second level is

¹¹² Laurence J. O'Connell, "Vocation" in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1993), 1009-1010.

that all Christians accept Jesus as Savior and follow Him. And the last level is a personal calling to each of us to live a particular way based on the gifts that are given to us when God created us. Bases on this we suggest materials for prayer and reflection for the first day.

2. To Seek God, to Know God, and to Love God

This exercise aims to help candidates reflect on their personal relationship with God. In order to know God and to love God, people ought to spend time to be with God. The prayer materials create a context for reflection on their desire for God and for God's call within them.

2.1. The Exercise

Theme: My vocation

John 1:35-42: Calling the first disciples

What are you looking for? Where are you staying? Come and see.

They came and saw where He was staying; and they stayed with Him that day

Luke 18:18-30: The rich young man

Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?

Sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come follow Me.

2.2. Reflection Questions

Why do I am here in this discernment? What am I looking for?

What is my purpose of life? What is my desire for life?

Who is God in my life? When and where did I spend my time with God? How did I experience those times?

How do I tell the story of my vocation?

3. Accept Jesus as Lord

This point helps candidates concretize their image of God through Jesus, Whom is God became men and stay among us. The suggested materials invite candidates pay attention to their desire to follow Jesus.

3.1.The Exercise

Theme: the Image of Jesus

Jn 3:16-21

For God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

Mark 8: 27 – 30

Who do people say I am?

But what about you? Who do you say I am?

3.2.Reflection Questions

How do I experience of Jesus in my life?

What are attracted words and deeds of Jesus, or stories about Him for me?

Who is Jesus for me?

4. Live According to Your Gift

Each of us is called to live in a particular vocation based on specific gifts that God has given to us.¹¹³ This point may not yet requires candidates quickly think about how to use their gifts to respond to God, so that they should think they have to do this or that. Rather, they are invited to reflect and recognize what God are given to them with grateful

¹¹³ Joseph A. Tetlow S.J., *Always Discerning: An Ignatian Spirituality for the New Millennium* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2016) 106-109.

heart and mind. They may be aware of why God have given these gifts to them; they should pay attention to God's call. Then they can reflect on their desires for themselves.

4.1.The Exercise

Theme: My gifts

Luke 19:11-28: Parable of Money Usage

1Cor 7:7: "Each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another different kind."

1Cor 7:17: "Each of you should go on living according to the Lord's gift to you, and as you were when God called you"

4.2.Reflection questions

What are my talents? What are my limitations?

How do I desire to use my talents to live my life?

What are God's invitations for me to deal with my talents and limitation?

5. Reflection for the day

Invite the candidates tell their history of vocation bases on these questions:

When, why, and how did I begin my desire for religious life?

Are there any new invitations for me during this day?

II. The Second Day: Knowing One's Self and Knowing God

1. Introduction

The first annotation of the Spiritual Exercises mentions the method and purpose of the Exercises. "Spiritual exercises is the name given to every way of preparing and making ourselves ready to get rid of all disordered affections 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 salvation of the soul." (Sp. Ex.1) Michael Ivens explains this in the following passage:

The purpose of the Exercises is explained as being a conversion of heart resulting in a new quality or a new direction of life. Conversion is both a 'turning to' and a 'turning from'. 'Turning to' in the language of the Exercises consists in seeking and finding the will of God, while the correlative 'turning from' is the process of getting free from the influence of 'disordered' drives and attachments that stifle love and impede integrity of intention.¹¹⁴

The Spiritual Exercises invites people to turn to God seeking God's will.

"Seeking and finding the will of God" consists in turning back to human dignity and the human vocation. This dignity implies that people "are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord." It also implies to seeing all things through the eyes of our loving God and being aware that "the other things on the face of the earth are created for human beings, to help them in working toward the end for which they are created" (Sp. Ex. 23). This is an invitation to turn to God's desire and the His loving plan for the salvation of the world.

Our lives are placed in relationship with God, and in this relationship, we live out our vocation to praise, reverence, and serve God. We can reflect on our life to be aware of how we lived our vocation, how we are responding to God's call, and how we should commit to following Jesus. This also invites people to turn from their disordered lives, by the help of the Holy Spirit, to be free from sins and disordered affections in order to transcend the "end" of the human person and to receive the redemptive love of Jesus Christ.¹¹⁵ This is the dynamic: "letting God reveal to the retreatant his or her sins and

¹¹⁴Michael Ivens, *Understanding The Spiritual Exercises*, (Herefordshire, England: Gracewing, 1998), 2.

¹¹⁵Ivens, *Understanding The Spiritual Exercises*, 2.

sinful tendencies in order that the retreatant might repent of them and realize that, in spite of them, he or she is a loved sinner.”¹¹⁶

This dynamism calls our attention to human dignity in order to respect the humanity of the person. God creates human beings and calls each person to use all they have to serve God and follow Jesus through a particular vocation as a way of helping people come closer to God. This dynamic in the first week of the Spiritual Exercises moves from the objective to the subjective. This is a movement from a general view of sin to personal sin, from the broken relationship between the Creator and creation to the cut-off personal severing of relationship between God and the individual. It is a movement from the external world to the self. This turning is presented through three points. The first turning point involves awareness that we are created in God’s image and likeness. The second is awareness that we are sinners but God loves us and saves us through Jesus Christ. The third is awareness of the call of Jesus for us to be his disciples. These points invite people to focus on God’s speaking to them in their innermost sense of who they are and who God desires them to become.¹¹⁷

Sometimes people consider their zeal for God-centeredness so much that they ignore, reduce, or even disregard their human value. Even though they are finite, God respects them as they are. The danger of rejecting their humanness is rejecting the created work of God. This invites a balanced attitude toward being human. Moving to God-centeredness does not mean discounting the value of being human. Rather, it means rediscovering human dignity and identity as they are created and blessed by God. God

¹¹⁶William A. Barry, *Finding God in All Things: A Companion to the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* (Notre Dame Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1991), 13.

¹¹⁷David L. Fleming, *Like The Lightning: The Dynamics of the Ignatian Exercises*, (St Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2004), 33.

desires people to live their vocation, to use what God has given to them to collaborate with Jesus in His mission for the greater glory of God and benefit of souls.

Besides that, God does not call a person from a vacuum but from a particular context. Family, social context, culture, and tradition can be both opportunities and challenges for their vocation. From this background, people can receive encouragements for their desire for God or be influenced by disordered affections as well. From their human condition, people experience God's call. At this point, the second part of "the Principle and Foundation" becomes the important criterion for discernment. "The other things on the face of the earth are created for the human beings, to help them in the pursuit of the end for which they are created. From this it follows that we ought to use these things to the extent that they help us toward our end, and free ourselves from them to the extent that they hinder us from it." (Sp. Ex. 23) Therefore, to discern about vocation, people need to pay attention to their situation and context, and be aware of how this context is affecting them or how are they using what has been given to them.

"The Principle and Foundation," suggests that people become "indifferent to all created things" so that they "desire and choose only that which is more conducive to the end for which we are created." (Sp. Ex. 23) This is the foundation for discernment of vocation that helps people becomes free from other attractions in order to focus on the call of Jesus and respond to Him. Furthermore, this movement will lead people to the personal and intimate situation that they are able to make a colloquy to Jesus, "speaking as one friend speaks with another" (Sp. Ex. 53-54). Ignatius suggests to look at Christ on the Cross. This implies meaning looking at what the great love God has given to us and "asking how it came about that the Creator made himself being and from eternal life

came to temporal death, and thus to die for my sins.” (Sp. Ex. 53) Jesus now becomes the friend of sinners. Turning to God and God’s love can move people and give them the desire to respond to God. Because God loves us so much and because Jesus has done all these things to save us, we desire to respond to Him in a similar way by asking “what have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I to do for Christ?” (Sp. Ex. 53)

Therefore, we can confirm that the purpose of human life involves turning to God-centeredness, as the first commandment teaches: “you shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.” This purpose always engages turning from self-centeredness. Self-centeredness can be experienced in desires, activities, abilities and talents, finite capacities and sinful conditions. All of these need to be transformed so that we sinners can become friends and disciples of Jesus. We suggest using the contemporary reading of the Principle and Foundation according to David L. Fleming for this exercise and prayer. Because, this translation includes explanation and using contemporary language, it is easy for candidates to get its meaning.

God who loves us creates us and wants to share life with us forever. Our love response takes shape in our praise and service of the God of our life. All the things in this world are also created because of God’s love and they become a context of gifts, presented to us so that we can know God more easily and make a return of love more readily. As a result, we show reverence for all the gifts of creation and collaborate with God in using them so that by being good stewards we develop as loving person in our care for God’s world and its development. But if we abuse any of these gifts of creation or, on the contrary, take them as the center of our lives, we break our relationship with God and hinder our growth as loving persons. In everyday life, then, we must hold ourselves in balance before all created gifts insofar as we have a choice and are not bound by some responsibility. We should not fix our desires on health or sickness, wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or short life. For everything has the potential of calling forth in us a more loving response to our life forever with God.

Our only desire and our one choice should be this: I want and I choose what better leads to God's deepening life in me.¹¹⁸

2. Getting Rid of Disordered Attachments: Turning from

This exercise invites candidates reflect on their disordered attachments: desires, attitudes, plans, works, and deeds in three aspects: disordered desires for self, disordered desires for mean rather than aim, and disordered attachments from the context: family context, culture and tradition, social context. Then, the Principle and Foundation and the Experiences of how Jesus overcame His temptations will serve as keys to rid disordered attachments.

2.1. The Exercise

Theme: Turning from my disordered desires

Sp. Ex. 23: The Principle and Foundation

Matthew 4:1-11: The temptation of Jesus

2.2. Reflection Questions

Who do I think that I am? Who do I desire to become?

Who do people expect me to be?

What are attractions that influencing my life and my desires? How did I use my gifts?

Who does God desire me to become?

3. Focus in The Right Direction: Turning to

The Principle and Foundation and Scripture passages help candidates reorder their desires by pointing out the right direction to their lives, the direction to God. This exercise suggests points help candidates get three kinds of awareness. First, that we are

¹¹⁸David L. Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship: the Spiritual Exercises, a Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading* (St Louis: Institute for Jesuit Sources, 1996), 27.

created in God's image and likeness. Second, that we are sinners but God loves us and saves us through Jesus Christ. Third, that is the call of Jesus for us to be his disciples.

3.1.The Exercise

Theme: Turning to God's Love for me

Sp. Ex. 23: The Principle and Foundation

Ps 139: O Lord, you have searched me and known me

Luke 7:36-50: Loved much for forgiven much

Luke 5:27-32: Call of Levi

3.2.Reflection Questions

How do I feel or describe God's love for me?

How do I desire to respond to God's love?

4. Reconciliation:

Adoration and do a colloquy to Jesus and receive the Sacrament of reconciliation

Be with Jesus to listen and respond to His call

III. The Third Day: "The Call of The King"

1. The Context of the Exercise

Saint Ignatius placed the exercise "The Call of The King" on the transitional day between the first week and the second week of the Exercises. It begins with the experiences of the redeeming love of God through Jesus that moves people to ask "in the past, what response have I made to Christ? How do I respond to Christ now? What response should I make to Christ?"¹¹⁹ Now, with the desire to respond to Jesus' love, Ignatius suggests that the retreatant enter into this exercise. David L. Fleming suggests

¹¹⁹ Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship*, 49.

that we see this exercise through two lenses. First, from the first week, “The Call of The King” is viewed as a consideration of mercy in which “Jesus invites us to enter into the action with him; he invites our participation.”¹²⁰ Second, from the second week, this exercise is seen as a contemplation of “the person of Christ and his life.”¹²¹ These two views can be seen as a progression with the common and central point of love, as both the unconditional love of God and the response of love from the human being. With these two lenses, we more clearly realize Jesus’ invitation to us. The invitation to respond to the mercy of God is always seen through the invitation to imitate the life of Jesus. To be with Jesus means to agree with Him, to have a relationship with Him, and to labor for Him.¹²²

Before we come to discuss the message of Jesus in the Spiritual Exercises 95, it is necessary to know the structure of this exercise. There are two sets of calls that come from two different kings. The first call comes from a great earthly and fictional king who “wants to overcome all diseases, all poverty, all ignorance, all oppression and slavery—in short, all the evils which beset humankind.” He invites people to join him in fulfilling his dream (SE 93).¹²³ This call can be familiar to people because they can realize the image of this sort of leader in some of the leaders of the church, of the community, or of the country. These are leaders who sacrifice their lives in serving the human family. This kind and generous leader can be a role model for the youth, who need to be exposed to someone who portrays their desires. This call brings out people’s desires for justice and

¹²⁰Fleming, *Like The Lightning: The Dynamics of the Ignatian Exercises*, 107.

¹²¹Fleming, *Like The Lightning: The Dynamics of the Ignatian Exercises*, 108.

¹²²Jean Lafrance, *Pray to Your Father in Secret* (Boston: Pauline Book & Media, 2016), 25-26.

¹²³Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship*, 85.

the common good that God places in their hearts. This call invites them to respond to the loving desire of God for the whole world. William A. Barry assures that “deep in all our heart is the desire for a universe where all men and women are united in one family under God.”¹²⁴ However, this is a call of an earthly leader in a fairy story. There is no kingly image on earth that can be worthy enough to be our model. Besides that, recently, scandals of sexual abuses among leaders of the church have created distorted images of leaders. On one hand, this can upset people’s regard for leaders of the church. On the other hand, this can elicit a desire for good shepherds. Only Jesus is our perfect model. The second call is the call of Jesus Christ, our Eternal King. Jesus and His call are introduced as “the fulfillment of the dream”¹²⁵ that God places within us.

My will is to conquer the whole world and all my enemies, and thus to enter into the glory of my Father. Therefore, whoever wishes to come with me must labor with me, so that through following me in the pain he or she may follow me also in the glory. (Sp. Ex. 95)

2. “My will is...”: The Desire of God

This call, first and foremost, invites people to pay attention to the desire of God that exists in our deepest longings and can be fulfilled by Jesus Christ for those who desire to bring the whole world to God the Father. Jesus desires to “win over the whole world, to overcome evil with good, to turn hatred aside with love, to conquer all the forces of death—whatever obstacles there are that block the sharing of life between God and humankind.”¹²⁶ Jesus came to the world to act on the redemptive plan of God. “For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son... not to judge but to save” (Jn

¹²⁴Barry, *Finding God in All Things*, 70.

¹²⁵Barry, *Finding God in All Things*, 72.

¹²⁶Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship*, 85.

3:16-17). People can experience the merciful plan of God in their Christian life. Sinners are forgiven and become friends of Jesus; prisoners of hatred receive freedom to respond to God's love; brokenness in relationships is rebuilt by generosity, service and a life of sharing. Suffering people are comforted and receive inner peace. That is the mission of Jesus (see Lk 4:18-21). By the call of our Eternal King, Ignatius invites us to realize this dream of God and shows us that Jesus wants us to be with Him in His mission, and to "be a part of His dream for our world."¹²⁷

2.1.The Exercise

Theme: The Desire of God for me

Sp. Ex. 95: "My will is to conquer the whole world and all my enemies, and thus to enter into the glory of my Father."

Jn 3:16-17: "For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son... not to judge but to save."

Luke 4:14-21: Jesus' public Ministry

2.2.Reflection Questions

How do I feel about God's desire in these messages? Is there any invitation for me?

Whom do I think God want me to become?

How do I want to respond to God?

3. "Come, Labor with Me":The Invitation from Jesus Christ

This second part of the call is to participate in Jesus' mission. His mission is giving the mercy of God to the world and to each human being. David L. Fleming argues

¹²⁷Barry, *Finding God in All Things*, 72.

that God desires for us to participate in his action of mercy. We are involved in God's plan. We are not passive receivers but coworkers with God.¹²⁸ Experiences of God and His actions of mercy play a very important role in our personal lives as we begin to hear the call of God. This involves our own experiences of the merciful action of God in our lives. We have committed mistakes, faults and sins, but we are forgiven. We damaged relationships with friends, relatives, others and God, but we have been reconciled. We are limited by our vices and weaknesses, but we are still be respected and loved. These are Jesus' merciful actions for us. He is calling us to join with Him in these kinds of action for our good and the benefit of all human beings.

This is the call to return to God, to see all things through the eyes of our loving God, to realize our disordered life and let God create order. We do this by paying attention to God's desire and plan for the whole world as well as God's love for each and all human beings. To participate in Jesus' mission means receiving Him as our beloved, the One who has scarified His life for us. When one talks about mission, people think of what works need to be done. However, Jesus' mission is expressed in His name Emmanuel—God with us. In the same way, to participate in Jesus' mission is to be with Him. Wherever He is, His companions will follow Him in hard fighting, toiling, and laboring even in pain, and then also be with Him in happiness and the glory of an intimate friendship. To be with Him is "to know Him intimately, to love Him more intensely, and so to follow Him more closely" (Sp. Ex. 104). That is the meaning of desire, for which Ignatius encourages us to pray and ask God as grace. We ask God to bring us into the personal relationship with Him. We ask God to give us a vocation. A vocation comes from God as a grace to respond and follow Jesus.

¹²⁸Fleming, *Like The Lightning: The Dynamics of The Ignatian Exercises*, 107-108.

This invitation is not a simple passive participation in Jesus' mission; rather it invites followers to labor with Him. This labor requires pain and hard work. It also offers the reward of glory with Him. Being moved by the mercy and love of God, people desire to respond to God by doing something for Him. Jesus kindles our desires of response to God's love through His mission of love and mercy. He continues strengthening our desires by calling us to work with Him in His mission. He calls us to be coworkers and friends. This invitation is based on love that brings inner happiness and strengthens our friendship with Him.

3.1.The Exercise

Theme: The Invitation from Jesus Christ

Sp. Ex. 95: "Therefore, whoever wishes to come with me must labor with me, so that through following me in the pain he or she may follow me also in the glory."

Matthew 10:24-42: the meaning of discipleship

3.2.Reflection Questions

Who is Jesus in my life? Where am I in my relationship with Jesus?

How do I respond to Jesus' call?

4. Reflection for This Three Days of Discernment

For the general reflection, following guideline questions for discernment of vocation from Pope Francis can be useful to review what candidate have experienced during these days. "Do I know myself, quite apart from my illusions and emotions? Do I know what bring joy or sorrow to my heart? What are my strengths and weaknesses? How can I serve people better and prove most helpful to our world and to the Church? What is my real place in this world? What can I offer to society? Do I have the abilities

needed to offer this kind of service? Could I develop those abilities? Who I am? For whom am I?"¹²⁹

Besides that, they are also invited to reflect on what God may talk to them in this discernment:

Who is Jesus in my life? Where am I in my relationship with Jesus?

What is God's invitation for me?

What is my desire to respond to God's call?

IV. Suggested Schedule for Three Days Discernment of Vocation

1. The first day

- 8h: Gathering, introduction, point 1 (My vocation)
- 9h: Prayer 1
- 10h30: Mass
- 11h30: Lunch
- 14h: Point 2 (Image of Jesus)
- 15h: Prayer 2
- 17h: Group sharing: story of my vocation
- 18h30: Dinner
- 20h30: Point for the next day (My gifts)

2. The second day

- 5h30: Wake up and prayer 1
- 7h: Breakfast
- 8h: Point 2 (Turning from my disordered desires)
- 9h: Prayer 2

¹²⁹Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit: To Young People and To The Entire People of God*, 131-132.

- 10h30: Mass
- 11h30: Lunch
- 14h: Point 3 (Turning to God's Love for me)
- 15h: Prayer 3
- 18h30: dinner
- 20h30: Sacrament of reconciliation, adoration and reflection

3. The third day

- 5h30: Wake up and prayer 1 (Pray with what you were moved during yesterday)
- 7h: Breakfast
- 8h: Point 2 (The Desire of God for me)
- 9h: Prayer 2
- 10h30: Mass
- 11h30: Lunch
- 14h: Point 3 (The Invitation from Jesus Christ)
- 15h: Prayer 3
- 16h: Group sharing: my desires to respond to God

4. Notes:

At each exercise, the director can flexibly choose one or more suggested scripture passages to conduct prayer points

Reflection questions can be used during free-times, after each prayer, or at the final refection of each day

Candidates are suggested to spend around 45 minutes to 1 hour for each time of prayer

Candidates can spend free-times for reflecting and writing their spiritual journal
Candidates will have personal conversations with the director during these days

V. Final Remarks

1. “Aim” and “Mean” of Vocation

Both director and candidates may face a common temptation to focus on evaluating to find a suitable vocation and to choose a particular way of life. That is focusing on mean. We need consider that who God want people to be as the aim of vocation and then how to live God’s desire by finding a particular way, in accordance with all what God has given to them as means of their vocation. Discernment of vocation helps in avoiding the confusion between “means” and “ends” of vocation. There are many people who desire to live good Christian lives so that they make certain decisions such as “marrying a certain spouse, or pursuing a certain office, or acquiring a certain property.” Gaffney notes that

By Ignatius’ standards, choices made in that way are corrupt and corrupting. And what makes them corrupt is their readiness to make ultimate purposes into pious afterthoughts. One should not, he insisted, plan or decide to be a good Christian husband, or wife, or proprietor, or official. That is to confuse means with ends. One’s basic decision should be simply that of being a good Christian, which was for Ignatius indistinguishable from being a good human being. And that decision should thereafter determine what one ought to do about such options as marriage, property, and office. For the point is not to see to it that one’s ultimate values survive one’s career. It is to see to it that they designate, stimulate, and animate one’s career.¹³⁰

This exemplifies certain events that happened while conducting discernment of vocations in our Jesuit Candidate House. On the one hand, some directors attempt to guide young men to discern and choose a certain way of life that they think God desires

¹³⁰James Gaffnet, “Ignatian Discernment,” in *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader: Contemporary Writings on St. Ignatius of Loyola, the Spiritual Exercises, Discernment, and more*, ed. George W. Traub, S.J. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), 156-157.

them to live, but they forget that God's foremost desire is for people to be good and happy. On the other hand, some young men come for discerning a vocation bring with them desires for doing things or getting a social position, thus, choosing a vocation is similar to finding a job. They confuse the "means" of vocation with its "end." The purpose of vocation should be responding to God's will. They must be guided to choose God's will and then after that choose a certain way to fulfill God's will. This dynamic clarifies the end of a vocation so that they can respond and choose the means that God desires for them.

2. Let God's Desire Transform Candidates' Desires

In the journey of life, there are some pause-points that require a choice about which way to continue. This can be especially true for young people, who stand as it were in front of a door that opens to a larger world at the crossroads of their lives. This crossroad requires a decision to choose a way to continue. Many of them desire to follow Jesus and to serve God and God's brothers and sisters in a consecrated vocation, but they do not yet know how to enact this desire. Until young people experience Jesus and his mission of mercy, they may not know how to name experience of being called by God. There is a fire and holy longing inside that motivates young people to go forward, beyond their duties of daily life to do something more. This desire moves them to find a meaningful way of life in which they can spend what they have, such as ability, knowledge, and talents, to serve and to make their lives fruitful. They are looking for a particular vocation.

When young men come to a discernment of vocation, they desire good things, for their parents, for their spiritual family, for their own interest. These seem to be the tip of

the iceberg of their deeper desires that are not something that can be demonstrated to others. Tradition, culture, and relationships can affect desires. Pressures of society, expectations from others, or prejudices can be obstacles for their acting upon deeper desires. Young people need help to channel their desires, to discover their deepest desire from which they also realize the desire of God, for the world, and for their lives. How does the desire of God transform candidates' desires?

Through what we have previously discussed on the call of Jesus in the Exercises 95, there are some tools that can help candidates transform their desires. Firstly, God's desire transforms their disordered desires so that candidates earnestly seek to join a religious community. They bring with them various desires. These desires on one hand are rooted in the deepest desire that God places within them, the dream for goodness and justice, for love and service. On the other hand, these dreams are surely affected by others—culture, tradition, family, and expectations. These affections can make their desires become disordered so that they obscure their deepest desire. Therefore, the call of Jesus Christ, with His desire can bring out candidates' deep inner desires, can reorder them to dream what God dreams.

Secondly, God's desire helps them transform their desires by inviting them to align their dreams with God's dream and allow God to form their desires so that they can view things through the eyes of our loving God. Candidates can dream about a good education, becoming a skillful person, or going around the world. The dream of Jesus invites them to desire all this but with the purpose of laboring with Him to bring the whole world to God the Father. Their transformed desires then become a yearning for the Kingdom of God. This is a transformation from self-centeredness to God-centeredness.

This is the call to build a personal relationship with Jesus to respond to His merciful love and to follow Him, to be with Him and to labor with Him in His mission.

Finally, God's desire can transform candidates from sinners to God's friends and disciples of Jesus. It is very clear in the call of the Eternal King, He desires to conquer the whole world, including each of us. He wants to bring us from a sinful condition to be the children of the Father. Jesus desires and acts to make His dream become true in this world, in our lives. Then He calls us to be with Him and labor with Him in the church and in the world. He becomes a human being like one of us in order to raise us up to be His friends. He needs companions and co-workers to continue His redemptive plan. From being sinners, the candidates can be transformed to become disciples. This transformation invites the candidates' response. God desires and waits for humans to respond. From this call of Jesus, they "come to know a God who calls us to enter into his dreams and then waits for us, with all our dreams, to respond."¹³¹

3. A Continuous Process of Discernment

This discernment is the beginning to recognize healthy signs of a religious vocation. Discernment of vocation must be a continuous process so that candidates can discover God's voice clearer and clearer. They need accompaniers help them to distinguish between mean and aim; to be more sensible of God's desire which is transforming their desires; and to be purified in their motivations.

We have focused our discussion on the context of young Vietnamese men intending to join the religious life. They come to our Jesuit candidate house for a discernment of vocation. To help them discern their vocation, we need to support these

¹³¹ David L. Fleming, *Discipleship and Its Foundations: A Jesuit Retreat* (Missouri: St Louis, 2005), 36.

young people just like Jesus who is calling them and standing by them. The One who calls them is the only one who knows exactly their inner motivations for responding. Because Jesus Himself has lit this fire in them, he stimulates their desires by His love and mercy for them. “The call of the king” invites young men to reflect on their desires and to particularly focus on their desire to follow Jesus, their motivations to be with Him. Their desires need to be met in Jesus’ desire. Jesus is inviting them participate in His mission. However, their desires may not yet fully respond to Jesus’ desire, but somehow they can be on the way to hearing His call. In this context, as formators, we experience the challenge of motivation that is a discernment of desire. This is not a straightforward process.

In discerning a vocation, there are many men who are quick to link their desires to apostolic works and what they think they need to do, rather than sharing in what Jesus wants them to do. Sometime we too easily agree with them and even suggest that they pay attention to such reasons for a Jesuit vocation. Sometimes, the criteria of work are considered as the main content of discernment. The discernment of vocation risks becoming an evaluation of the value of works. The apostolic purpose for Jesuit vocation is very real. We cannot reject them but can discuss them too early at the beginning of a discernment of vocation. This risks leading the candidates to satisfy their own ambitions or expectations. Apostolic works can be unconsciously abused to cover up desires of self-interest and ambition. We need to introduce a foundation and tools that help candidates look at their desires in and through God’s desire for the world and for them. “The Call of The King” gives them the lens to see the way that Jesus is inviting them to walk with Him, to be with Him like the disciples who were called to stay with Him then were sent

to do what Jesus ordered them. That is the journey of vocation. Through this lens, the candidates can view the real root of their desire: the mercy of God and Jesus who is both the embodiment of God's love and the fulfillment of God's desire for the world and for themselves. This view of desire will channel their desires towards following Jesus, to pay attention to Jesus and His life. Who is Jesus for them?

This question will draw the attention of young men to Jesus and His mission rather than just look at their lives, their conditions, and their own desires. Vocation is the call to follow Jesus and to participate in His mission. His call involves all of His life, His words and deeds, His heart full of mercy, His suffering, His friendship and His invitation to intimacy. He beckons us.¹³² Vocation also requires their response to that call. Jesus never forces people to follow Him. He simply calls people and waits for their free response. At this point, young men are recommended to reflect on their inner freedom to follow their deepest desires and then respond to the call of Jesus. Who does God want them to become? Jesus calls them and respects them as they are. This call must be powerfully experienced to help them overcome the pressures of social relationships and the expectations of others.

On the one hand, this call helps young men to be balanced, more aware of vocation, of religious life, of following Jesus and working with Him. Vocation is not an idea, it does not aim to provide a high and respectful social position such as evaluated by a secular and commercial view about a job. Rather, vocation is following Jesus to labor with Him for the glory of God and the benefit of souls. On the other hand, this call also gives people strength and inner joy because of their intimate relationship with Jesus. Laboring with Jesus involves not only suffering but also the joy of love. Religious life

¹³²Fleming, *Discipleship and Its Foundations: A Jesuit Retreat*, 34.

does not deal only with the demands of discipline, sacrifice, and giving up many things such as related to the Gospel's message "If you want to come with me, you must forget yourself, take up your cross everyday, and follow me" (Lk 9:23). Rather, the purpose of following Jesus involves realizing His love so that, moved by this love, one responds to Him with desire to become like Him. Jesus did all things for us because He loves His Father and loves us. His desire does not remain with suffering but rather aims to express His love for us. "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life to one's friends" (Jn 15:13). The true value of Jesus' invitation and of our vocation is based on love. Because of love, Jesus labored for us. Because of love, He desires us to work with Him. Because of love, we desire to respond to Jesus' desire. Love makes person desire to become like their beloved. This is the deepest aspect of the invitation. This is the purpose of vocation. Our attitude for discernment of vocation is to be united with the spirit of Saint Ignatius when he wrote:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding and my entire will—all I have and call my own. You have given all to me. To you, Lord, I return it. Everything is yours; do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace. That is enough for me. (*The Suscipe* by Saint Ignatius)

Conclusion

We can compare guiding discernment of vocation with having young people draw a tree of their life. The upper part of the tree that is above the ground, is its branches, leaves, flower, fruits, etc. All these visible parts are externals that we can see. However, the roots that are under the ground are much more important, and we need to be aware of them. We can help people begin their discernment of vocation with their visible experiences of life, desires, and attraction to the religious life, and so on. But we seek to guide them to go deeper into the inner place to discover God's voice speaking to them.

The foundation of every vocation is Jesus Christ and the grace that comes from God, who is invisible but acting in the deepest human desire.

In Ignatius' experiences of conversion, especially during his time at Loyola and Manresa, as well as in the Spiritual Exercises, young people get a guideline for reflection and discernment to realize that they are invited to transform their life from making their own plans to putting their life into God's plan. This is a transformation from disappointment because of sin to hopefulness because of God's love and mercy. They realize that they are transformed from a sinner to being a friend and disciple of Jesus. In addition, the meditation "The Call of The King" is a way to channel candidates' desires. Jesus' desire can transform their desires. A discernment of vocation helps them place their desires in the midst of Jesus' dream for the world and for them. This desire invites them to know Jesus more, love him more, and follow him more closely. This desire can lead them to follow Jesus and to become His disciples. "Deep in all our hearts is the desire for a universe where all men and women are united in one family under God. Ignatius' parable wants to arouse that desire in us and then point to Jesus as the one who will lead us to the fulfillment of that deepest desire of our hearts."¹³³

"The Call of the King" can be considered as the second foundation of the Spiritual Exercises. In this section of Ignatian prayer, there is an invitation can help in a discernment of vocation. When and how was the first time one encountered Jesus? It could be a very simple encounter but an important experience and becomes a foundation for our relationship with Christ and the beginning of our vocation. It can be a turning point that changes our life in a particular direction of following Jesus. This first

¹³³Barry, *Finding God in All Things*, 71.

experience invites us to begin a progression of discovering, deepening, and developing our personal relationship with Jesus. Through this view of “The Call of The King,” young men may find the inner power to overcome their challenges and become free to commit their lives to Jesus, Who is waiting for them to be His companions. This exercise can assist both the director of discernment and those who come to discern because it directs people to focus on God’s desire and His call to participate in Jesus’ mission.

Father Pedro Arrupe S.J wrote “On Fostering Vocation” to remind Jesuits and those who are vocation promoters and directors of a discernment of vocation that:

All of us, and our candidates as well, having heard and answered the call of the Kingdom, must know that precisely in this surety of our spirit and vocation and in the risk we run in trying to render better service to the Church and our fellow humans, we have a basis for true confidence, security and evangelical enthusiasm, as well as a perfect witness to our total abandonment to the Lord.¹³⁴

This insight indicates the process of discerning and growing in our Jesuit vocation.

¹³⁴ Pedro Arrupe , S.J., “On Fostering Vocations: A letter of Father General to all Major Superiors of the Society, Rome 11 July 1973,” in *Challenge To Religious Life Today: Selected Letters and Addresses – I*. Ed. Jerome Aixala, S.J. (St Louis: Institute for Jesuit Sources, 1979), 109.

CONCLUSION

All vocation began with desires. We do not judge whether they are good or bad desires, but we can be sure that those desires were influenced by various factors: culture, society, traditions, family background, and so on. In a discernment of vocation, candidates are invited to reflect on their desires and to keep in mind that a vocation is a call from God. This call goes beyond what they desire to do or what others expect them to do. Rather it concerns the desire to become who God desires them to be. This is the deepest desire that God places in them. Michael Ivens notes that, “The desires of Ignatian spirituality are true when they are true to God: their object is the will of God and his purpose.”¹³⁵ (see Sp. Ex. 23)

Recognizing one’s vocation involves discovering God’s desire and one’s own deepest desire. Discerning vocation is a process involving both awareness of self and recognition of God’s will. To respond to God’s call, candidates seek to become aware of their deepest desire and to allow this desire to be transformed, so to be aligned with Jesus’ desire. Ivens further explains, “It is clear that the norm of our own desires is God’s own desire; we praise, reverence, and serve God by desiring with him, and becoming involved in the working out of his desires.”¹³⁶ In Ignatian spirituality, desire directs people to God, giving them a foundation and criterion for discerning their vocation. Desire can also transform their spiritual life.

Through the Exercise “The Call of The King,” we discover a way to transform human desires. Who is Jesus for us? This question helps candidates to be aware of Jesus,

¹³⁵ Michael Ivens, SJ., *Keeping In Touch: Posthumous Papers on Ignatian Topics*, ed, Joseph A. Munitiz, SJ, (Herefordshire, England: Gracewing and Surrey, England: Iñigo Enterprises, 2007), 117.

¹³⁶ Ivens, SJ., *Keeping In Touch*, 117.

His mission and His desires rather than to focus on their own desires. This does not mean they are giving up their desire, but they can receive power from Jesus' desire to transform their desires. The desire of Jesus can transform candidates' disordered desires so that they earnestly seek for their purpose of life that God wants them to fulfill. Jesus transforms their desires by inviting them to share with Him what is God's dream for Him and for them. Jesus' desire transforms them from sinners to become God's friends and His disciples. This Exercise can be a meaningful tool in a discernment of vocation not only for the Jesuit Candidate House in Vietnam but also for any formation house helping young people find a better way to follow Jesus.

In a discernment of vocation, we help young people to become more aware of their desires and of their motivations. Holy desires and good motivations are expected as signs of a genuine vocation. A vocation involves the call of God and a human response. God calls and provides opportunities for those God has chosen to grow and be available to respond to God. Therefore, we should respect God's manner of choosing candidates and collaborate with God in helping people more clearly listen to His voice. Nothing is impossible to God. We ask for God's grace by recalling the prayer of Saint Augustine "Let me know Thee, O Lord, who knowest me; let me know Thee, as I am known."¹³⁷

Discernment of vocation is a process needing regular practice in prayer and reflection. Recently, in his apostolic exhortation to young people, Pope Francis invited them to discern their vocation in "a certain degree of solitude and silence." They need to learn God's language in prayer. At the same time, the Pope urges,

¹³⁷ Saint Augustine, *The Confession, book X, 1:1*, Translation by Henry Chadwick, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 179.

Yet this silence does not make us close in on ourselves. We must remember that prayerful discernment has to be born of an openness to listen – to the Lord and to others, and to reality itself, which always challenges us in new ways. Only if we are prepared to listen, do we have the freedom to set aside our own partial or insufficient ideas... In this way, we become truly open to accepting a call that can shatter our security, but lead us to a better life.¹³⁸

This message invites young people to keep in mind two attitudes. First, they should prepare themselves to listen for God’s voice. Second, they should be always open to God’s will so that God can guide them into His plan. The discernment of a vocation must continue throughout life. It does not happen only in choosing a status in life, such as marriage or religious life, or following a contemplative or active spirituality. Rather, it invites people to keep choosing to be faithful to their vocation, and therefore God’s will, in every moment of their lives.

In Jesuit spirituality, desires cannot be removed from a Jesuit’s vocation and mission. For young Jesuits, their Founder expected that their desire for God and their apostolic desires would be energetically kindled. This is his spirituality of the *Magis*, “to be more for the glory of God and the good of souls.” (*Autobiography* 85) In recent times, the 35th Congregation of the Society of Jesus (Jan 7 – Mar 6, 2008, in Rome) challenged Jesuits to go to new frontiers to respond to this *Magis*. “It is here that we must discern our mission according to the criteria of the *magis* and the more universal good... Thus as this world changes, so does the context of our mission; and new frontiers beckon that we must be willing to embrace.”¹³⁹The Congregation calls them reflect and discern in their daily lives and their present missions in order to hear the voice of Jesus Who is calling to them from those frontiers.

¹³⁸Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, 130-131.

¹³⁹ John W. Padberg, S.J., edit, “General Congregation 35, Decree 2: A Fire That Kindle Other Fires, in *Jesuit Life and Mission Today* (Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2009), 741-742.

Vocation in general, even Jesuit vocation, is not the same for everyone. Just as God creates each person with uniqueness, God call each person according to she or he unique desires personality, background, gifts, etc. I hope that this suggested discernment of vocation will not neither create a “spiritual vainglory” for young people nor entertain any illusion about their own and about religious vocation. Rather, it may help them be more aware of the reality, included opportunities and challenges, strengths and weaknesses, and with open door to future. Besides that, the spiritual life is a journey of growing and bearing fruits. This will allow people accept their own limitations even fails and always open to them a chance for discovering mystical deeds of God doing something for them and with them. This thesis get its spiritual and theological background from holy women and men, particularly Saint Ignatius of Loyola. I borrow their spiritual ideas as a finger point to a way going to God.

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