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Ignatian Leadership Collection

Discerning Leaders: Forming Jesuit Higher Education Administrators and Faculty in the Ignatian Tradition

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Abstract

The need for good leadership is essential for any institution to be successful over the long term. In our current context, many months into a pandemic (Covid-19), the rising awareness, anger, pain, and frustration of racial inequalities that are becoming more public and part of the national conversation, and the wide-ranging uncertainty of so many areas of life that make both short- and long-term planning extraordinarily challenging, the need for good leaders is even more important. Leaders in Jesuit higher education face the same societal challenges as any other institution of higher education. Jesuit higher education, however, whose mission is grounded in the charisma and spirituality of Ignatius, founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), has within its tradition an incredible resource for sound decision-making and leadership formation.

Ignatian discernment is a process that helps people make important decisions. Overlapping at times with many other well-established decision-making processes, it may appear to be just one more tool for the toolkit. For some who look a bit more closely, they find it also includes some spiritual and/or religious aspects that could seem helpful for the decision-making process at hand. For those who take still a deeper look, Ignatian discernment invites one into a way of living, of being, even in the middle of incredibly turbulent times when important decisions must be made. Ignatian discernment provides a continuous process for leading that happens before, during, and after decisions are made. Because leadership is about making the best decisions for the groups one leads, discernment can be a cornerstone for effective leadership.

This paper seeks to describe some principles of Ignatian discernment. It will also highlight some similarities and differences from other sound decision-making practices and techniques. In the process, it will apply some of these principles to a program called the Ignatian Colleagues Program (ICP), a program offered to faculty and senior-level administrators in the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities network.¹ ICP offers these leaders in Jesuit higher education a way to engage the process of becoming discerning leaders in this Ignatian tradition by exploring more fully their own decision-making process and considering how they might make this Ignatian style of discerning leadership their own.

Ignatian Discernment

In many ways, we are what we do. What we do stems from our choices, and so the choices we make, our decisions, tells the world about what we find important, valuable, or worthy of our time and energy. Some decisions are more important than others. Some require more time and attention. Some we make intentionally and with a great deal of thought, preparation and research.

Others are made with far less effort, and some we decide by not deciding.

Often times, decisions are perceived as a sort of problem or challenge to be solved or an opportunity to be considered. Once we have come to a decision, we move on to the next one. In cases like these, the decision is the primary goal in and of itself. The decision answers the question: what am I going to do? By contrast, Ignatian discernment provides a *process* for making practical

decisions. It employs some of the same techniques that good decision-making practices follow.² But, in the context of Ignatian discernment, the decisions themselves, as important as they are, are not the sole focus of the process.

The term “discernment” means to sever or separate values, wants, and/or needs. It is a keenness of insight and skill for discriminating. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), a man who was once a soldier who dreamed of serving in the high court of his day and winning the admiration of the women around him, experienced a spiritual conversion while he was recuperating from a leg injury he sustained during a battle with the French in Pamplona, Spain. During these months, he began to notice the movements of the Spirit within himself. The movements that he identified as “consolations” led him toward generosity, self-giving, and connectedness with God and others. Those that he identified as “desolations” led toward isolation, self-preoccupation, and despair. The process of identifying these movements, which was eventually codified as the *Spiritual Exercises*, shed light on how God was working in him and inviting him to reconsider how he might spend his energy during his life. Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*, which have been among the greatest gifts to Christianity, laid the foundation for Ignatian discernment.³

A Few Words About God

For the purposes of this essay, by the term God, I am referring to the God of Christianity as that is the God of Ignatius and the tradition upon which Ignatian spirituality is grounded. It has been said that discernment lies at the heart of Christianity, the logic being that if Christians are known by their actions, and their actions stem from the choices they make, then discerning well will lead to actions that demonstrate their Christian faith. Because Ignatian discernment is part of Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* and Ignatian spirituality, all of which are grounded in the Roman Catholic religious tradition, Ignatian discernment includes a connection with God and Jesus Christ. For the Christian, the question, “how should we live?” is always in relationship to their religious beliefs and values. However, for those who have other values or faith traditions, whether they are part of a

religious denomination or claim a secular outlook, Ignatian discernment also offers a process for deepening one’s own humanity and core values.

Discernment and Decision-Making

In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius provides three “times” or ways we often go about making important decisions and suggests that, while these ways often overlap when we engage in the decision-making process, each employs a particular emphasis. In the first way, one’s will is emphasized when coming to a decision.⁴ In the second, the emphasis is on one’s feelings, and in the third way, the emphasis is on one’s reason. Again, we do not rely solely on any one of these in a discernment process, but it is helpful to notice how different decisions strike us and how each one calls forth a different emphasis.

The first way is often described as when an opportunity presents itself and speaks to us so clearly, striking an inherent, central part of our identity, that we feel compelled to say yes. It is one of those times where we cannot not choose it. Not much discernment is needed in the sense that one’s mind, heart, and body are in sync and the choice is clear. While this type of decision may not happen too often, it is a joy (or a relief) when it does.

The second way we often process decisions is when an opportunity presents itself, and the decision seems relatively clear to us. It makes sense, it resonates with us, but we do not experience the overwhelming sense of clarity that the first way provides. To come to our decision, we explore our feelings and we notice how we are drawn to this option, how it may interest, excite or delight us. But we also discern the many feelings we have and attempt to sift through those that are fleeting or superficial from the ones that are more significant. We try to sense our inward contentment and peacefulness around this option. We also try to notice in what direction these stronger, inner feelings are leading. Do they tend to light and life, in ways that involve and support others, or only inward, focused on self and on one’s good? Again, in this way, the option is relatively clear, but we pay attention to our feelings and sift through them for signs of confirmation of our decision.

The third way is one where the choice is neither obvious, nor are we leaning a particular way toward one option or the other. Here, Ignatius would have us emphasize the use of our reasoning. We may find ourselves in a time of tranquility but can't notice any hints that attract us one way or the other. Similar to other current and helpful decision-making techniques, Ignatius suggests making a list of pros and cons for each option. Lists can help us clearly see and weigh the benefits and limits of each choice. He also offers three activities that can be helpful: a) imagine counseling someone in your situation; b) imagine being on your deathbed and considering which option would give you more peace, and; c) after one's death, imagine meeting Jesus Christ and sharing with him which option would provide the best use of your talents for him? By highlighting different ways in which we make our decisions according to a particular (though not exclusive) emphasis on our will, feelings, and reason, these three ways of decision-making, even by today's current best practices, offer sound guidance.

In addition to these practical techniques for deciding on an Ignatian way, Stefan Kiechle, S.J. suggests ten guiding principles of discernment, several of which will be taken up in more detail below. When one is making a discernment, Kiechle suggests the following:

1. Stay in touch with reality. Aspirations are valuable but reflecting on our day, through prayers such as the Ignatian Examen, keep us grounded in honesty.
2. Time management. Make a plan and seek to stay at peace during the process as much as possible. If peace is not present, he suggests the clock is off with the "rhythm of your soul."
3. Seek guidance from and the advice of prudent people and test alternatives. Share your ideas instead of keeping them silent. Silence provides space for the "evil spirit" to have influence.
4. Notice your emotions and listen to your heart and mind. Both are needed.
5. Identify and name the core value of this decision and don't get lost in the

- minute details. The "evil spirit" makes decisions more complicated.
6. Do not make decisions in a crisis as one is not "free enough" to recognize their deeper desires and make an honest decision.
7. Know your limits and weaknesses and recognize them.
8. Mourn the possibilities you deny in order to accept the choice you make so that you can more fully embrace your choice.
9. Use Jesus and his life example as your guide.
10. Cut the Gordian knot, accept the risks, and let go. Ensure trust throughout the decision.⁵

Several techniques of general decision-making and Ignatian discernment are similar. For example, listing the pros and cons of the situation, using our rational and intellectual abilities, acknowledging but not being overly swayed by emotions, making a plan, keeping it real, considering the potential benefits and risks are commonalities in each process.

One could also make connections between Ignatian discernment and a S.W.O.T. analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) that tries to get a sense of all the considerations of a situation and make choices that align with one's goals or the goals of one's institution. One could stop here and think something like, Ignatius sounds like an interesting guy and some of these decision-making techniques could be helpful. You might also understand why leaders who work in Jesuit institutions might pick up some of these ideas. But, besides the meeting Jesus part, is it really any different from everyday decision-making? When it comes to the practical decision-making time, you would be correct to say, "No, there really isn't that much difference between them." But as is often claimed on many "As Seen on TV" ads, "But wait! There's more!" At least there is more for those who seek to become a discerning leader in the Ignatian tradition.

While Ignatian discernment is a process for making important decisions, when engaged more fully, it can also be understood as a way of being that influences one's way of living and leadership

style. Ignatian discernment is an ongoing and holistic process that honors and engages intellectual and affective ways of knowing. It takes one on a journey of learning about oneself, naming and claiming deeper wants and desires, and reckoning those areas of life that limit the ability to live one's more authentic sense of self. It invites one to engage in a relationship with their God, and possibly to reconsider or deepen the meaning, implications, and experiences of life in terms of that relationship.

In its application to leadership, it is important to stress that Ignatian spirituality does not seek to convert anyone to or from anything but instead helps one lead from a truer sense of one's self. It is available to all people and adaptable to other religious and spiritual practices, both for those who claim a strong faith-life and no faith-life. The goal of Ignatian discernment is to help people identify that which is sacred and authentic in their lives, to make choices consistent with their deepest desires, and to act on those choices. Ignatian discernment invites all people to engage in a way that aligns with one's own history, experience, and culture, and to make it their own. That path is unique for everyone and the concept of God can be interchanged with other concepts that might denote one's sense of higher purpose or core values.

Ignatian Spirituality

If one is to engage in Ignatian discernment, it is also helpful to have a sense of the broader concepts of Ignatian spirituality, as this spirituality provides the foundation from which discerning leadership or Ignatian discernment flows. Ignatian spirituality is invitational and adaptable. It assumes that one is seeking something, that one has a *deeper desire* for something and/or someone. Spiritual writer Fr. Ronald Rolheiser describes desire as the basis for understanding spirituality when he says, "Desire is our fundamental disease."⁶ He continues, "spirituality is ultimately what we do with that desire."⁷ Ignatian spirituality assumes there is a desire to be in a *relationship* with something or someone and to be loved by that something or someone. One of the major premises of Christianity and Ignatian spirituality is that God is a loving God. Another way to say this is that God is love, which is to say that God is

constantly inviting us into a relationship while loving us at all times and in all circumstances.

In a relationship, there is mutual sharing that requires listening and being available to the other and *reflecting* on that relationship. Time spent in relationship with, listening to, and being available to God is called *prayer*. The relationship between the Creator and the created is a loving relationship in which one chooses to participate or not. When one chooses to enter into a loving relationship, their whole being is more fully developed. The person lives more authentically through their thoughts, ideas, decisions and actions.

Ignatian spirituality begins in gratitude and ends in hope. Ignatian discernment also begins from the perspective of gratefulness for the world, others, and the many gifts that God has shared with us. Stemming from the themes in the first "week" (i.e., phase) of the *Spiritual Exercises*, one encounters God as a loving God, one who has provided all that is created, including ourselves and our ability to make our own choices, simply because this God loves us and seeks to be in a loving relationship with us. That God is a God who loves us, continually loves us at every moment, desires to be in a relationship with us, and desires that we live our humanity fully and authentically. This is the foundation of both Christianity and Ignatian spirituality. Also central to both is the belief that our deepest and most authentic desires for ourselves are also God's deepest desires for us.

Through the reflections on themes in the first week of the *Spiritual Exercises*, one begins to be more deeply aware that God loves each of us overabundantly, for no reason or actions of our own but simply because that is who God is. Being loved abundantly can lead to an overwhelming sense of gratitude and often stirs a desire to respond to that love in some way, such as loving oneself, God, others, and/or the world more intentionally.

Discernment: A Response to, and Occasion for, God

While some of the skills, exercises, or techniques might be similar to one's usual decision-making process, it is important to consider that the goal or

objective of Ignatian discernment can be seen as a way of life, always mindful of and centered on one's relationship with God, self, and others, and deepening those relationships. David Lonsdale, S.J. writes that Ignatian discernment is "the art of appreciating the gifts that God has given us and discovering how we might best respond to that love in daily life. It is a process of finding our way of discipleship in a particular set of circumstances."⁸

Note that discernment is a daily process during those times when important decisions need to be made, but also on all other days regardless of whether important choices are needed. This is the lifestyle, if you will, of a discerning leader.⁹ Lonsdale's description also reminds us that God loves us, and that we are in a loving relationship with God. Similar to the gratitude and appreciation we experience when we are loved by others, we often show or respond to being loved through our own loving efforts, choices, decisions, actions, i.e., the way we live our lives. Loving grandparents dote on their grandchildren, parents arrange their days, time, and energy to nourish and support their children, couples make personal sacrifices willingly for something that benefits or assists their partner—these are all outward expressions of having been loved and responding through loving others.

Elizabeth Liebert, who has written several books on individual and communal discernment, distinguishes the difference between decision-making and discernment in terms of goals and means. She writes, "Notice that the decision is the *occasion* for seeking God, not the primary goal. Setting out with the goal of making a decision that we then ask God to bless is to confuse the goal and the means. Rather, discernment involves the goal of seeking God through the means of decision-making."¹⁰ Liebert's description of discernment helps to differentiate common decision-making practices from Ignatian discernment. Making decisions and having a helpful process to do it, while important and essential, are not the main goal of Ignatian discernment, but rather, seeking God is, and the process of making decisions is but one "occasion" or opportunity for this to occur. Ignatian discernment is about the process whereby one seeks to live and make choices as authentically as

one can. This "occasion" implies there are many "occasions" for seeking God. In fact, one common Jesuit phrase is the idea of "finding God in *all* things."¹¹ And while the idea that we can "find" God on our own or by ourselves is a bit misleading, the idea is that God can be encountered in *all* things, i.e., in all opportunities, peoples, places, events—essentially, all *occasions*.

Jesuits and others have often described this process as their "way of proceeding" or, to be "a contemplative in action."¹² Both imply a continual process of making choices and taking actions that stem from one's desire to deepen their relationship with self, God, and others. The decisions made through Ignatian discernment flow out of a set of values, attitudes, relationships, and desires that have been pondered, explored, prayed about, researched, noticed, and reflected upon. These are all directed toward the goal of deepening one's relationship with their God, self, and others, and of living more authentically. Part of the process for the discerning leader includes an honest appraisal of oneself and some vulnerability before one's God, others, and society.

Some questions a discerning leader might consider before addressing any important decision on the horizon include the following: What do I really desire for myself? Can I really lean into my deeper desires? Where have I embraced this? Where do I have doubts? Am I willing to put societal values and signs of success aside to consider life more holistically and how I might live toward that more fully? Where is God in this process? What is God's invitation here? How am I trusting (or not) that my deeper desires are also in alignment with God's desires for me? What life do I wish to lead that brings out my most authentic, holistic, and/or best self? How might I use my gifts and talents to be of service in a way that resonates with who I am? Reflection on questions like these takes time and ideally begins well before any decision needs to be made, and can ensure that leadership is undertaken in an Ignatian spirit.

Inward then Outward

If one is seeking to become a discerning leader in the Ignatian tradition, the work begins, ideally, before any concrete decisions need to be made. In

reality, what often happens is that we are constantly a work in progress where decisions are made as we are learning and living. Even so, Ignatian discernment calls us to spend time working on our interior life before, during, and after decision-making. The process of Ignatian discernment does not end when a decision is made but continues in a different way as the individual seeks confirmation of their choice.

Taking stock of our reality through introspection, reflection, and prayer is essential. Reflecting on who we are now and exploring some of the threads of who we have always been since we were little children can be helpful. This includes appreciating our gifts, challenges, struggles, dreams, and the successes and failures of ourselves, our relationships, and professions. Tapping into, remembering, or even allowing ourselves to consider our deeper desires for ourselves and the way we live our lives provides the foundation for the way we orient our thinking, decisions, and actions. They provide the perspective to help us live toward those deeper desires—which is what it ultimately means to live authentically.

Inner Freedom

The inward focus also honestly acknowledges those areas of our lives that limit us from living authentically. Ignatian discernment and spirituality invite us to consider our interior freedom through prayer, conversations with God, self and others. We are invited to examine our interior baggage so we might become more “free” in order to live more fully.

In the book of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius’ worldview is distilled in a section called the “First Principle and Foundation.” In it he names the ultimate purpose of living as loving God. Being created by and continually loved by God, Ignatius reasoned, evokes a loving response in return. Inner freedom allows us to love more fully and consider possibilities, options, and choices from a solid foundation. It requires a kind of detachment.

Some have described Ignatian detachment as being like a scale that is in balance. The late Jesuit Dean Brackley describes Ignatian detachment in the following ways:

“Being so passionately and single-mindedly committed, so completely in love, that we are willing to sacrifice anything, including our lives, for the ultimate goal... It means magnanimous generosity, abandonment into God’s hands, availability... It means being like a good shortstop, ready to move in any direction at the crack of the bat.”¹³

Far from “not caring,” Ignatian detachment means:

- that we are not overly hindered, restricted, afraid, or biased to consider the options before us
- our eyes are open to the realities, potential risks and even dangers of particular choices
- we are trusting enough in God’s love for us that we are willing to choose a path of life that is most fulfilling, whatever the cost.

While we may never be completely “free” in that we will always carry some baggage with us, the goal of Ignatian detachment is to get free enough from those things in order to make better, healthier, and more life-giving choices. One example of the power of inner freedom can be seen in the life of St. Oscar Romero, who, in the face of death threats, continued to speak out against the Salvadoran government officials who abused their power and acted violently against their own citizens. His interior freedom and trust in God led him to stay with the Salvadoran people until he was killed while celebrating mass. When we are in that space where our personal baggage has less of a hold on us, we are less self-centered and more outward facing. We can imagine broader possibilities and creative options. We can dream more fully. We become more available to following our deeper, more authentic desires, and love ourselves, others, and our God more fully.

“It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.”¹⁴

“The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing.”¹⁵

Feelings

Feelings are an important source of knowledge. They drive us. Have you ever bought a car, home, or piece of furniture that your research told you was or wasn't a "good investment" but you found it really cool anyway? You wanted it. We see adolescents make decisions like this all the time! They might do well to exercise a little more temperance but notice how powerful and meaningful feelings are for all of us. Often in decision-making we are encouraged to keep our feelings out of it, to think rationally. Ignatian discernment would certainly support and encourage the use of our intellect as part of the process. Yet, when we are honest with ourselves, we can often find times when we made a major decision in life that we "knew" was the right one, not only because our intellect or the rational process led us to that conclusion but also when it didn't "make sense." We still somehow "knew" inherently that it was the right choice.

For example, in several workshops I have asked faculty and administrators who were in leadership positions or contemplating leadership positions when did they know that they wanted to be a part of education, or to teach, or to make this subject their academic discipline or profession. When I give them a few minutes to see if they remember how they got here, and then share those stories with a partner, it is always a joy to witness. Nearly all remember something, an event or moment, that clicked for them. Most recall the moment instantly, and can describe the location, who was present, and what was going on in great detail. Others easily remembered how it resonated deeply in some way with them. And when asked how long ago that experience occurred, I have responses ranging from 5 years to 45+ years! They knew and knew so deeply not because it was a rational decision but because it struck a chord inside them of something related to their deeper desire for who they were and what they wanted to be about. I encourage them to consider how these experiences and feelings have affirmed their knowing and decisions when they are in touch with them. These moments were of such importance that they have invested their lives, their professional careers and livelihood on them. In ways like these, falling in love with someone or something makes all the sense in the world.

Feelings, when carefully noticed and sifted, are a vital source of information about who we are, what we love, care for, and value. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius offers sets of rules for what he calls the "discernment of spirits."¹⁶ These comments are intended (primarily for the spiritual director) to help the retreatant notice the way God and the "evil spirit" present themselves to us in various ways. We learn that all feelings may be real, and we have many each day, but sifting through them to notice which ones are more valuable than others, which ones we need to pay attention to, is a skill that Ignatian discernment helps one develop. Learning to notice the direction these feelings are leading us is an important part of the process of maturing discernment.

Consolation/Desolation

In order to make good decisions, it is important to know where we are and what space we are in. By this I mean to understand not only the immediate feelings or situations affecting us on any given day (tired from lack of sleep, hungry, or cranky from dieting), but also where we are underneath the daily range of emotions. Have we been in a pretty good space lately? Where am I as I work on several hard challenges? What is my overall attitude and is my affect hopeful, upbeat, and open to possibilities for myself and others? Have I been in a space that seems heavy, dark, and/or alone, even when daily life is going pretty well? Have I been spinning my wheels on something? Does it feel like the weight of the world is on my, and only my, shoulders?

Ignatian spirituality describes the spaces we are in as "consolation" and "desolation" and our work is to sift through these feelings to get a sense of where we are. These flow continually throughout our lives. While we may be in one state for some time, the other will surely follow like the ebb and flow of the tides. The state of consolation can be described as feelings accompanied by an inclination with inspirations which emerge from it and make it intelligible—less centered on self, more open to others in generosity, service, and love (and ultimately, God). Desolation is the opposite of consolation. Its characteristic tendency is to draw us inward to be self-centered, closed in, unconcerned with others (away from

God). It is often described as darkness or heaviness.

The benefit of noticing whether one is in consolation or desolation is not so much about the kind of feeling one is experiencing (happy, sad, bored, etc.) or where the feeling is coming from or even what it means, but rather the direction these feelings are leading: to lightness or darkness, to self-centeredness and isolation, or outward focus and generosity. Recognizing which space we occupy can alter how we consider options and make decisions. One is cautioned not to make a decision when in desolation as we are not “free” enough to honestly consider the options before us as well as we need to.

When we do this interior work, and make progress on our inner freedom through prayer, reflection and conversations, perhaps with the assistance of others such as a spiritual director or a trusted friend, we can then look outward to the world, seeing it more clearly for all it holds; its promise and potential within the significant challenges of our current reality, and make more holistic decisions. Through the process of Ignatian discernment, while something tangible is being decided, what is really going on is that one is deepening their relationship with their God, their love of self, others, and all creation in some way.

Ignatian discernment is always between two or more good options. One discerns which option is the better of the two. Stefan Kiechle, S.J. outlines some criteria for discernment he names, the *Ignatian More*, which helps to further understand Ignatian discernment.¹⁷ Kiechle suggests one consider the decision in light of how it might bring “greater faithfulness and greater spiritual consolation.” Greater faithfulness requires inner freedom, resonates with our deeper desires for ourselves, and is in alignment with God’s desires and our authentic desires. Greater faithfulness considers which alternatives will be more effective, more beneficial to, or more productive for myself and others, and help me become my most authentic self? Greater spiritual consolation considers which alternatives offer more joy, peace, fulfillment and contentment? Which leads me toward good and life-giving relationships with myself, others, and God? Kiechle also has one consider whether the decision we are making is

serving others or serving only ourselves? Both purposes can be fulfilled but knowing where to place the emphasis is important. Lastly, he suggests we consider “poverty or a downwardly mobile career” meaning that we reflect upon our options in light of those at the bottom of our society—the poor, the sick, the marginalized—and consider how our decision might help align us more closely with them in some way. Through considerations such as these, Ignatian discernment helps one to stay grounded in one’s humanity, seeking to live one’s life most authentically.

Post-Decision Experiences

After one makes an important decision, we often experience some feelings of doubt. We wonder if we made the “right” or the “best” decision. We sometimes get some pushback from friends, family, and colleagues. It seems every time I buy a car, the first week or so I can’t help but notice all the other cars of the exact same make and model that are also for sale. I wonder, did I get the best deal? When I’ve made major decisions to move or take a new position, I’ve experienced some friends or family who comment, “are you sure? Why would you leave us?” or something similar. We need to recognize that no decision, even decisions made in the first way of Ignatian discernment, are perfect. There are always risks, unknowns, losses, and sorrow. We will experience some level of doubt and some of our friends and family will push back or question our decisions. So, how do we know we made the “right” decision?

As we have said, Ignatian discernment is an ongoing process and does not end when a decision is made. Once we make a decision, we look for signs of confirmation. This is a bit different from say, looking for the rainbow or an eagle to fly over at a particular moment. Instead, we notice if we remain in a state of consolation. We notice if we are experiencing a sense of overall contentment, and peace, and our focus remains inwardly-centered and outwardly available to possibilities. We can notice if our doubt is short-lived and fleeting or remains with us for some time. Often, while we are looking for signs of confirmation (we would love the rainbow or eagle to appear out of nowhere), the confirmation comes in the form of the quiet, inner contentment

that we experience on an ordinary day, meaning, we experience an ordinary day, with little pushback, no earth-shattering moment but instead a quiet, inner contentment or “a peaceful easy feeling” as the song by the Eagles goes. These are confirming signs that our process of discernment was a healthy and honest one. Ignatian discernment does not guarantee a “happily ever after” outcome. So many of the decisions that our institutions have needed to make in light of our current pandemic have faced some resistance and disagreement. Yet one can affirm that the better choice was made when they have confidence that the process was a fair and honest as possible, and an appropriate level of due diligence was given toward it. Should a decision not work out, Ignatian discernment would suggest a review of the process to see what biases, prejudices, unfreedoms or due diligence was missing.

Ignatian discernment is never about “winning” or even that the decision is “successful.” Should we experience a torrent of never-ending doubt and notice that we are not in consolation but desolation, Ignatius suggests that we should review the process from beginning to end. Perhaps there were areas of fear, anxiety, or bias inhibiting our freedom and clouding our process. Perhaps our level of honesty and trust in self, others, and God needed more reflection and prayer. Perhaps we were not brave enough or willing to really claim our deeper desires. After all, living our most authentic lives is also risky business. When we make bold choices, they affect us and others in ways that can feel threatening or entail some type of loss or change. When a friend or loved one moves away to take a new job, we are happy for them, yet selfishly we don’t want them to leave us. Knowing ourselves intimately through the process of Ignatian discernment helps us to sift through these moments and feelings and determine their meaning and significance.

Communal Discernment

The previous sections have tried to highlight several aspects of Ignatian discernment ranging from the practical activities or exercises one might employ when making a decision to some of the characteristics that go beyond many traditional decision-making practices. I’ve tried to illustrate how Ignatian discernment is a never-ending

process that begins with our interior, always attempting to ground ourselves in one’s most authentic identity and our deeper desires. This process has its foundation in our longing to love and be loved by someone or something. For the Christian and other believers, being loved by their God so abundantly stirs in them a desire to respond or return that love in some way through their love of God, self, and others in their daily living and decision-making.

Leaders who embrace the ideas and style of a discerning leader in the Ignatian tradition often have transformational experiences affecting their personal and professional lives. In the workplace, a discerning leader often gains a new or a nuanced perspective of their role within the institution and the way they engage that role in daily activities. Ignatian discernment also provides the possibility for leaders to influence the way individuals, departments, and divisions work together in new, imaginative and creative ways. Discerning leaders can adapt some of the ideas and skills of Ignatian discernment for groups, teams, departments, and divisions.

Communal discernment, while a very in-depth process, invites each staff member to engage in their own interior work as they strive to come to a common decision or plan. It requires a significant level of trust among participants, clarity of the issue at hand, significant reflection, prayer and more. In many ways, an authentic Ignatian communal discernment process requires each participant to be aware of, and actively engaged in, their own practice of discerning leadership. Not many groups may be interested, willing, or prepared for a full communal Ignatian discernment and one should not seek to begin one if the group has not prepared well for it. But groups may profit by engaging in some of the practices of Ignatian discernment in their daily or weekly meetings which can lay the groundwork and habits that build the trust and practices needed to assist future group processes and decisions.

The benefits of incorporating some of the practices of Ignatian discernment into group meetings builds up community and trust and helps to clear away some of the concerns, biases, and agendas that are often active in group dynamics.

When done well, it is often a powerful and meaningful experience that generates a deeper sense of connectedness of group members and greater ownership of the decisions. Communal discernment helps the community remain grounded in their institution's mission and the gifts each brings to it. Programs like the Ignatian Colleagues Program (ICP) seek to form individual discerning leaders in the hopes that they will then influence others to develop their own discerning practices and possibly if the conditions permit, engage in either a communal discernment process or to use aspects of discernment in their planning and meetings. In light of this, it is now possible to highlight some aspects of how the activities and processes of ICP foster an understanding of Ignatian discernment and helps in the ongoing formation of discerning leaders in the Ignatian tradition.

ICP: Forming Discerning Leaders

The Ignatian Colleagues Program is a national program of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU) designed to educate and form administrators and faculty more deeply in the Jesuit and Catholic tradition of higher education. The goal of the program is to provide a solid intellectual foundation as well as opportunities for participants to personally experience the spirituality that underlies Jesuit education, so they may better articulate, adapt, and advance it on their campuses. About one-third of each cohort are faculty members.

ICP was initiated in the context of a declining number of Jesuits working as faculty, administrators and staff on Jesuit college and university campuses. It was created by a group of lay leaders, Jesuits, provincials, and others who responded to this reality and believed strongly that lay colleagues had more to offer as mission leaders in Jesuit higher education. They were confident that an institution could remain "Jesuit," i.e., true to the mission and ministry of the Society of Jesus, and perhaps in some ways become even more "Jesuit" with a large and committed community of lay leaders in positions of responsibility. What emerged was an 18-month program consisting of an orientation, online workshops, an international immersion experience, an Ignatian silent retreat, summer

workshops, a mission integration project, and a capstone experience. The format and delivery of the ICP engages significant concepts and themes of Ignatian spirituality and discernment, providing a solid framework for the philosophical and theological foundation of Jesuit higher education and community.

One of the greatest benefits of the ICP as reported by participants over the years is the sense of community among participants. ICP promotes Ignatian community, that is, *in relationship with others*, beyond institutional barriers, sharing ideas, insights, and questions, along with our personal life experiences with one another. This is true within a particular cohort, but also extends when participants of different cohorts connect. When participants realize that their cohort of 45-60 people is just part of a community of more than 600 who have engaged in similar experiences, it shapes their identity as an Ignatian educator and builds trust for common work in the future. As one participant shared,

I am immensely grateful for the opportunity to participate in the Ignatian Colleagues Program. It has truly been one of the highlights of my professional career. Thanks to this program, I feel better equipped and more inspired to lead within my institution. I am grateful for the friendships formed and the many incredible people I've encountered along the way. The program has provided me with new energy and a new sense of hope for the future of our institutions.¹⁸

In terms of discerning leadership, the "yes" of participants in agreeing to participate can be seen not only as a "yes" to their institution or to a professional development opportunity, but also as a personal "yes" to something within themselves. Faculty and administrators are extremely busy. Making an 18-month commitment to participate in ICP which includes more than 20 days of travel and many hours of online learning and discussions is quite significant. What many say in retrospect, however, is that their personal and professional growth far outweighed the sacrifice. As the program enters its twelfth year, candidates have a much clearer understanding of what it offers. That "yes" often taps into some type of inner or

deeper desire, a desire for wanting something for themselves that goes beyond helpful professional development. Even when it is not fully known or articulated by the participant when they begin, something is drawing them into this experience that they find worthy of their time and energy. Upon completion of the program, and often for many years afterward, we hear participants express how some component such as their immersion, the retreat, or their colleagues, touched something in them and changed them in some way. Some have described their ICP experience as transformative in the sense of who they are currently and how they approach their work and life.

The ICP was an incredibly moving experience that deepened my connection to what it means to be a part of the U. S. Jesuit institutional network. It informed me personally and professionally as I am certain it will continue to do into the future.¹⁹

Ignatian spirituality underscores that we are drawn to opportunities that cohere with our deeper desires for ourselves, something that resonates with who we seek to be about, our authenticity. When one is part of a group or a program that encompasses participants who have been similarly drawn to seek more of their own authenticity, “the work” becomes more fulfilling, enjoyable, and perhaps a bit lighter. Though they are already leaders on their home campuses, participants are free in ICP once again to be learners, and to be themselves without the weight or expectations their titles and roles often hold. In this way, ICP participants come pre-disposed to seek something of significance for themselves, while the program creates a space that fosters engagement with ideas and concepts and encourages the exploration of one’s deeper desires.

The online learning workshops provide a variety of articles, videos, and case studies for participants to review and learn about, and to consider how they might be relevant to their campus reality. Engagement with these materials with fellow colleagues from different institutions provides great opportunities for new learning, sharing of resources and perspectives, and mutual support. Through the online learning workshops, and their

accompanying small group Zoom discussions, themes of Ignatian discernment and leadership surface for participants to consider, engage, and adapt to fit their leadership style and institutional reality.

Additionally, the workshops include personal reflection questions that invite participants to critically analyze and problem solve an issue, and to consider what this topic, issue, or idea means to them personally. How does this issue resonate with their values and beliefs? How does it challenge them to change or adapt in some way? How might this idea have significance for the type of person they seek to become? The reflection questions provide opportunities throughout the program to personalize these ideas and experiences, not only in light of one’s professional role, but also with respect to personal identity. This habit of reflection that ICP fosters provides the conditions for one to “try on” some aspects of Ignatian discernment and leadership, and for change and transformation to occur.

The use of case studies is also a key mechanism for discerning leaders. Case studies are used throughout the program, beginning at orientation, in several online workshops, and at the final Capstone gathering. Case studies are considered not as a reflection on the past, but as a forward-looking activity in light of current realities facing our institutions such as Covid-19, online/hybrid learning, racial justice/injustice, and political tensions.

ICP intentionally asks participants, especially at Orientation and Capstone, not only to offer suggestions or to problem solve the case study, but to spend time reflecting on the issue at hand, where and how it strikes them, their level of interest or concern, the areas of freedom and unfreedom the issue brings up, and their level of trust with the group they are working with. The pre-readings and directions for the case studies are intentionally created in light of discerning leadership using areas of Kiechle’s principles such as staying in touch with reality, listening to what one’s mind and heart are telling them, knowing one’s limits, and other Ignatian discernment concepts.

Ignatian Examen

As a way to assist participants in developing their own habit of reflection and prayer, ICP provides opportunities to experience and develop a practice of the Ignatian Examen. This short prayer/reflection activity that Ignatius adapted from the Christian tradition begins with gratitude and appreciation for all the gifts one has received that day. It is a way for each person to reflect on the day's events in order to determine where they have experienced spiritual consolation or desolation, where they have experienced love (from God, self, others), what they wanted for themselves (deeper desires), and what they are hopeful for tomorrow.

The Examen is an incredibly helpful tool in the ICP formation of discerning leaders as it creates a process for one to look inward and notice one's joys, gifts, and areas of gratitude. It also helps one deepen their sense of self by considering what they want for themselves, not only in the present but also in relation to their identity as a whole. The exploration of one's feelings, and the learned habit of sifting through to identify the more valuable feelings inviting attention, provides the ability for discerning leaders to know themselves well, gifts and limitations alike. These skills help a leader to be aware of what areas are helping or unduly affecting their leadership thinking and decision-making. When done each day over a period of time, the Examen is very helpful in determining the basic direction of one's life. It is an extremely brief and practical prayer for meaningfully tapping into one's deeper desires. There are many versions and styles of the Examen. For some examples, see Jim Manney, *A Simple Life-Changing Prayer*.²⁰

Magis Retreat

ICP provides participants the gifts of time and space without the expectation of a report or proposal due when they return. The idea of retreat days in silence is often a very new experience for most participants, some of whom are not particularly religious in their practices or with their congregation. The Magis retreat, a seven-day silent Ignatian retreat, provides participants the opportunity to learn about some of the major themes and movements in the *Spiritual Exercises*

while also offering them the chance to personally experience it in ways that honor their religious freedom. A morning provides both content and a daily theme. Participants are paired with certified spiritual directors who are familiar with Jesuit higher education and skilled at welcoming of participants from all faiths, including those with no faith tradition. The spiritual directors seek to accompany those on retreat, to listen well, mirror what they are hearing, raise up the gifts and contradictions that might be present, and offer suggestions for how best to spend the day. Neither steering nor leading, spiritual directors accompany those on retreat and offer support and encouragement as the experience of being in quiet for several days opens up new ideas and invitations. Learning personally about Ignatian spirituality brings together in a holistic way one's professional and personal life.

The retreat experience also provides the opportunity for building their discerning leadership capacity by inviting participants to look inward even more deeply, especially during one's meetings with their spiritual director, by exploring areas of inner freedom and blockages, considering areas of consolation and desolation and reflecting on their deeper desires for themselves and their institutions. They are encouraged to remain open to being surprised, i.e., to encountering their God/higher power, and self, and to noticing which areas of their life are flourishing and which need renewal. Experiences like these help retreatants clarify, remember, or name core beliefs and values, and make choices that flow from these. During these days, after a participant settles into the new routine of quiet and the seemingly luxurious amount of "free time" (of which they are encouraged to fully enjoy), they often begin to tap into something of significance about themselves, their God, or others that they wish to explore. Participants comment on the many gifts they receive from retreat such as a deeper appreciation of themselves, those they love, a deeper appreciation for their institution and its mission, and a renewed sense of energy and spirit. For those who staff these retreats, it is not uncommon to see participants enter the week looking worn down, often times exhausted. Yet when leaving, they seem to have shed years off their shoulders and walk with a renewed sense of energy.

The personal experiences of the retreat centers squarely on Ignatian discernment in an environment that fosters trust, rest, community, and self-giving. Providing an opportunity for leaders to rest and renew is always helpful on its own. But to also provide a setting that helps leaders explore their deeper hopes and desires for themselves and for their institution offers great potential for them to imagine their work as leaders from a new, nuanced, and creative perspective.

Immersion

The ICP immersion, a seven-day international experience opens up the opportunity for participants to view Ignatian life from the vantage point of another culture. Designed as an intellectual and affective immersion rather than a service trip, the purpose is for ICP participants to *witness the reality* of the people who so generously receive them.²¹ While they are learning about the history and political and economic reality of a location, they are also listening to personal life stories of local community members in locales such as El Salvador, Nicaragua, Peru, the U.S.-Mexico border, and the Dominican Republic. Some are heartwarming, others heartbreaking. Many hosts have endured severe hardships, oftentimes beyond the imagination of ICP participants. Participants are often bewildered that those who tell the most painful stories remain optimistic and/or hopeful and continue to speak of the love of God and their community. These encounters often raise within participants internal questions about their own history, lifestyle, culture, sense of national identity, experiences of racial injustice, and more. Some experience a sense of guilt and/or shame. Others find themselves at a loss for answers or seek to ‘fix it’ in some way.

The immersion is an especially helpful experience for the discerning leader as it highlights realities of life in ways that one may not often notice or be aware of in one’s daily routine. It provides the opportunity to witness, often in strikingly harsh and beautiful ways, situations that are being played out in some format in one’s hometown and institution. Issues of racial injustice, political influence, systemic poverty, socioeconomic disparity, the effects of natural disasters, and government abuse or neglect of its people are realities often noticed when on immersion.

Immersion participants also see these realities presented in the context of hope, joy, creativity, love, and beauty by those who live daily in this context. By witnessing all of these realities in another’s culture and country, it provides a leader an opportunity to strengthen their awareness of their own personal and institutional reality and assists their capacity as discerning leaders.

Many express gratitude for the experience, particularly for those they encountered who shared a portion of their personal story with us. Reflecting on her ICP immersion experience, one participant shared,

The trip to Nogales was life-altering for me. I took seriously the three-part challenge offered by the Kino Border Initiative—humanize, accompany, complicate—and felt myself drawn in contradictory directions as I strove for all three. I carry the stories and faces of the migrants I met with me, and they fuel my commitment to act more. One way in which the experience has remained with me: I am better able to step outside of myself, to see that while I face “challenges,” I do not have “problems,” and to embrace the fact that this realization means I do have obligations to act with and for others. In universities, we often speak conceptually of the power of service and immersion experiences for students without having had those kinds of experiences ourselves. Now, I speak about the power of those experiences from a more informed place.²²

While each may have a different experience, the immersion serves to help participants consider some of what they have been learning about and experiencing regarding Ignatian spirituality and reflect on its implications for them personally and professionally. The hope is that the immersion experience and the stories they hear first break their hearts, and then, break their hearts open in new ways that deepen their awareness, even when they return to campus of being part of a global family.

Conclusion

When all of these components are put together and engaged in by a community of professional leaders, they inevitably grow as discerning Ignatian leaders. ICP brings a community of leaders together who share challenges and realities relating to their work at similar institutions. It invites and encourages each participant to explore and foster their sense of authenticity, their God, and to do so from the tradition and spirituality that is also the foundation of the institutions where they have planted their own stakes in the ground for the long-term. Because of this, the emergence of

discerning leaders in the Ignatian tradition is often realized by many. ICP fosters the charism, tradition, and spirituality of Jesuit education by providing time and space for participants to explore their deepest connections to it. Through ICP, participants make their institutional mission their own. They model it, teach it, and lead it in ways that resonate with who they are as individuals, and as professionals. In this way, ICP helps to form discerning leaders in the Ignatian tradition. ¹¹

Notes

¹ Ignatian Colleagues Program, <https://www.ignatiancolleagues.org/>.

² An internet search provides examples of popular decision-making practices and techniques that also include commonality with Ignatian discernment. See “Decision Making 101,” ReachOut.com, accessed, August 4, 2020, <https://au.reachout.com/articles/decision-making-101>.

³ Louis J. Puhl, S.J., *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius: Based on Studies in the Language of the Autograph* (Chicago: Newman Press, 1951).

⁴ James Martin, S.J., *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 313-326.

⁵ Stefan Kiechle, S.J., *The Art of Discernment: Making Good Decisions in Your World of Choices* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2005), 105-121.

⁶ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 3.

⁷ Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing*, 5.

⁸ David Lonsdale, S.J., *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 91.

⁹For further development of this idea see Joseph A. Tetlow, S.J., *Always Discerning: An Ignatian Spirituality for the New Millennium* (Chicago, Illinois: Loyola Press, 2016).

¹⁰ Elizabeth Liebert, SNJM, *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 44.

¹¹ “Finding God in All Things,” Loyola Press, accessed August 4, 2020, <https://www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/ignatian-spirituality/finding-god-in-all-things/>.

¹² “What Am I Here For? Being Contemplatives in Action,” Loyola Press, accessed August 4, 2020, <https://www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/ignatian-spirituality/introduction-to-ignatian-spirituality/what-am-i-here-for-being-contemplatives-in-action/>.

¹³ Dean Brackley, S.J., *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times: New Perspectives of the Transformative Wisdom of Ignatius of Loyola* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), 12.

¹⁴ Antoine de Saint-Exupery, *The Little Prince*, trans. Richard Howard (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Inc., 2000).

¹⁵ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1966), 127.

¹⁶ Puhl, *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius*, 313-337.

¹⁷ Kiechle, *The Art of Discernment*, 47-66.

¹⁸ Ignatian Colleagues Program, Capstone Evaluation (January 2020).

¹⁹ Ignatian Colleagues Program, Capstone Evaluation (January 2020).

²⁰ Jim Manney, *A Simple, Life-Changing Prayer: Discovering the Power of Saint Ignatius Loyola's Examen* (Chicago, Illinois: Loyola Press, 2011).

²¹ Thomas Kelly, “Ignatian Colleagues Program Immersions: Formation in the ‘School of the Poor,’” *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 8, no.2 (Fall 2019): 100-107.

²² Ignatian Colleagues Program, Cohort 11 Immersion Experience Evaluation (March 2019).