



A Guided Process

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# Ignatian Discernment

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Suhail Stephen





# Introduction

- St. Ignatius of Loyola was a Spanish man who lived in the 16th century. Before his conversion, he lived a decadent life and wholeheartedly pursued military honour, sensual pleasure, and fancy dress.
- In 1521, his leg was shattered by a cannonball and after several gruesome surgeries, he convalesced in bed in his father's castle in Loyola. He was given books on the life of Christ and the Saints and as he read them, he began to wonder what it would be like to emulate what he was reading. He found that this imagining left him fulfilled, while imagining his former life left him hollow. This was the beginning of many reflections on spiritual discernment that led to conversion.
- St. Ignatius eventually founded the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) and his most famous work, "The Spiritual Exercises," comprises the heart of Ignatian spirituality. It offers a profound framework for experiencing God through scripture and various meditations and contemplations. St. Ignatius is considered by many to be the master of discernment in the Christian tradition.
- In the Ignatian tradition, discernment involves decision making and its practical outcomes as well as what St. Ignatius called "the discernment of spirits:" learning to become aware of, understand, and respond to interior feelings and thoughts with spiritual appropriateness.
- Discernment is never *just* about decisions and outcomes. It is also always a process of spiritual formation relative to our sense of who God is and who God has made us to be. This document is meant to give you a practical, comprehensive, and patient framework for both deepening your experience of God *and* making good decisions in the context of Ignatian discernment.



# Ignatian Discernment

## A Guided Process



The Choice

p. 4



Principle and Foundation

p. 5



Holy Indifference

p. 6



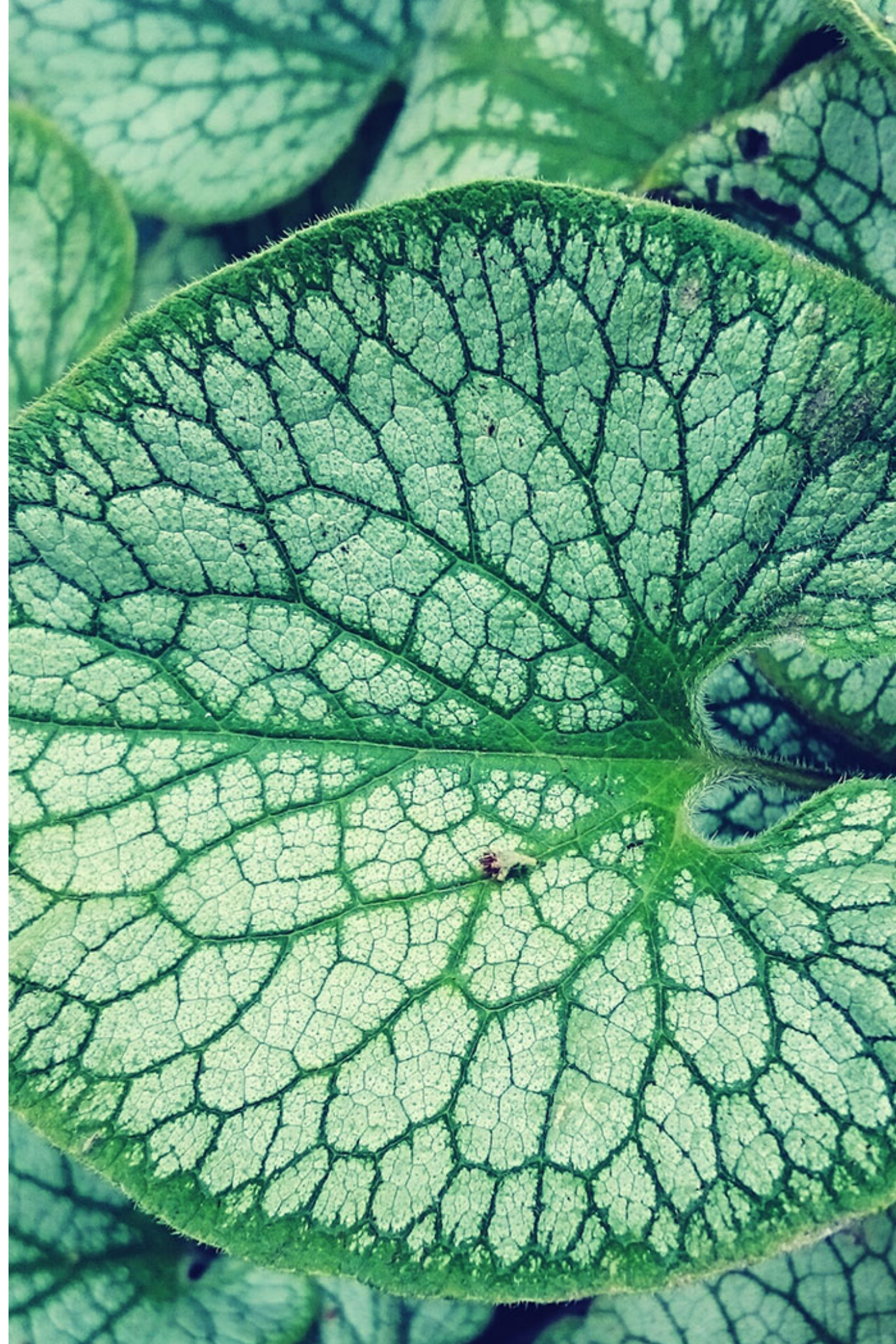
Various Mechanisms

p. 7



Confirmation

p. 15







# The Choice

- In this initial, important step, you seek to clarify exactly what it is you are asking God about.
- Discernment works best when we consider reality as it actually is and seek to choose accordingly. For example, asking God about whether you should live on Mars or even what career you should pursue is not that realistic. Neither Mars nor all careers are viable possibilities.
- A better discernment question might be, for example, “Should I be an astronaut or a math teacher?” It is helpful to hone your discernment question to an either/or, a this or that, or to at least work to limit the options as you begin to pray.
- In other words, in the most concrete and clear way possible, what is the choice before you that you are bringing to discernment?





# Principle and Foundation

- St. Ignatius encourages us to have a "principle and foundation." Something that - independent of any decision - we seek and hold to.
- For example, his principle and foundation was:

*"God created human beings to praise, reverence, and serve God, and by doing this, to save their souls.*

*God created all other things on the face of the earth to help fulfill this purpose. From this it follows that we are to use the things of this world only to the extent that they help us to this end, and we ought to rid ourselves of the things of this world to the extent that they get in the way of this end.*

*For this it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things as much as we are able, so that we do not necessarily want health rather than sickness, riches rather than poverty, honour rather than dishonour, a long rather than a short life, and so in all the rest, so that we **ultimately desire and choose only what is most conducive for us to the end for which God created us.**"*

- For Jesus, his principle and foundation might have been something like what we hear him pray in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Father, not my will but yours be done."
- As you approach this process of discernment, what is your "principle and foundation?" What is it - above all else - that you ultimately desire as it relates to God and your life with God in the world?





# Holy Indifference

- You cannot engage discernment having already made a decision.
- "Indifference" in the Ignatian tradition does not mean that you do not care about the choice before you or that what you are discerning is unimportant - quite the contrary.
- Ignatian "holy indifference" means that as you approach discernment and the choice before you, your ultimate and increasingly singular desire is for God's will - *whatever* that may be.
- Indifference means you should "not be swayed or show a preference for one side rather than the other, but remain in the middle like the pointer of a balance."
- Having named your principle and foundation above, review the choice before you for discernment.
- How would you describe your sense of "holy indifference" as you approach the discernment? Are you inclined to one way or another - if so, which way and why? Make a note of these inclinations and offer them to God and reiterate your principle and foundation in prayer - what, ultimately, you desire.
- When it feels like your posture in discernment is one of predominant indifference, proceed to the next step.





# Mechanisms

- In this step, you use various Ignatian mechanisms - reason, imagination, interior movements, and the counsel of elders (those older/wiser than you) and peers (spiritual directors and friends etc.) - to help you discern what God is inviting you to.





## Mechanisms: Reason

- Once again, review your principle and foundation and ask God for the grace of holy indifference.
- Ask God for help to move your mind to the better decision.
- Make a list of the possible positive and negatives outcomes of choosing one way, and then the possible positive and negative outcomes of choosing the other way.
- Look over your lists (in a manner similar to Lectio Divina) and see which way your reason inclines; which way “shimmers” and appears most reasonable. What is it, exactly, that seems most reasonable to you and why? And more particularly what seems most reasonable relative to your life with God?
- The idea of using this method is to:
  - Reinforce the truth that no decision yields a “perfect outcome” - there are likely positives and negatives on both sides.
  - Alleviate the emotional anxiety with which significant decisions are often fraught.





# Mechanisms: Imagination

- Once again, review your principle and foundation and ask God for the grace of holy indifference.
- Ask God for help to move your imagination to the better decision. Consider the following scenarios and notice what happens within you as you pray this way:
- Imagine a person whom you have never seen or known and imagine what advice you would give them regarding the same decision you are facing.
- Imagine yourself at the point of death and imagine asking yourself "What should I have done?"
- Imagine yourself at the Last Judgment, standing before Jesus face to face. Which choice would you want to present before God?
- The idea of using this method is to:
  - Free yourself from an excessive focus on yourself in the decision.
  - Free yourself from thinking solely of the present. The question isn't just "what's expedient now, but what is good and wise in the long-term?"
  - Encourage you to consider your faith seriously and what it might entail.





# Mechanisms: Movements

- Once again, review your principle and foundation and ask God for the grace of holy indifference.
- Ask God for help to move your heart to the better decision.
- Weigh the choices before you with your heart. If you were to choose one thing, how does it *feel* to you? If you were to choose the other thing, how does it *feel* to you?





# Mechanisms: Movements

- Consider Ignatian Discernment of Spirits. Read the following from The Spiritual Exercises:
- St. Ignatius' Third Rule (Consolation). *The third is of spiritual consolation. I call it consolation when some interior movement is caused in the soul, through which the soul comes to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord, and consequently when it can love no created thing on the face of the earth in itself, but only in the Creator of them all. Likewise when it sheds tears that move to love of its Lord, whether out of sorrow for one's sins, or for the passion of Christ our Lord, or because of other things directly ordered to his service and praise. Finally, I call consolation every increase of hope, faith, and charity, and all interior joy that calls and attracts to heavenly things and to the salvation of one's soul, quieting it and giving it peace in its Creator and Lord.*
- St. Ignatius' Fourth Rule (Desolation). *The fourth is of spiritual desolation. I call desolation all the contrary of the third rule, such as darkness of soul, disturbance in it, movement to low and earthly things, disquiet from various agitations and temptations, moving to lack of confidence, without hope, without love, finding oneself totally slothful, tepid, sad, and, as if separated from one's Creator and Lord. For just as consolation is contrary to desolation, in the same way the thoughts that come from consolation are contrary to the thoughts that come from desolation.*





# Mechanisms: Movements

- As you consider both choices, which option seems to evoke *the most consolation*? Which feels more in line with God's Spirit and the movements therein? In other words, which choice seems to interiorly evoke more:
- Love for God
- Tears, as a result of any of the following:
  - God's love for you
  - An increasing awareness of sorrow over your own sin
  - Considering what Jesus experienced
  - Things seeming directly ordered to God's service and praise
- Faith (belief and trust in God)
- Hope (that things will be okay and a good future awaits you)
- Love (for God, others, yourself, creation)
- Interior joy (that gives you motivation towards God and the things of God and gives you a sense of peace and contentment in God)
- Interior quiet and peace in God





# Mechanisms: Movements

- As you consider both choices, which option seems to *the most desolation*? Which feels more against God's Spirit and the movements therein? In other words, which choice seems to interiorly evoke more:
- Darkness of soul and disturbance in it
- A tendency to move to "low and earthly things" (things that detract you from God and the things of God)
- Disquiet resulting from various agitations or temptations
- Diminishment in faith, hope, and love
- Diminishment in motivation and spiritual vitality
- Sadness (that inhibits progress towards God and the things of God)
- A sense of separation from God





## Mechanisms: Counsel

- Have some conversation with those older/wiser than you, as well as some peers (examples listed on pg. 7). Bring the decision and the choices/options before them and see what their counsel is for you.
- These people (elders and peers) are those who know you, want the best for you, love God deeply, and are discerning people (as in they are gifted and able to notice God's presence/voice/activity in their own lives and in the lives of others).



# Confirmation

- By this point, you should have enough to make a good decision. And now you entrust the decision to God and ask for confirmation.
- Confirmation can be interior (an increasing sense of the rightness of one choice relative to another, deepening faith and certainty about an option, etc.) and exterior (circumstances aligning, God speaking through another person to you, etc.).
- Consider what confirmation might look like for you, the timeline for it, etc. and ask God to confirm the decision so that you can move forward in it.

