respond in the same way. All the contemplations on the Gospels throughout the Exercises foster growth in the virtue of faith that empowers us to trust God and commit ourselves to service.

Reflecting on Faith

- What are the moments in my life when I have been asked to surrender to God and the mystery of God’s plan?
- Recall the significant yeses in my life when I responded to God’s call to commitment?
- When have I been called upon to trust in God and God’s faithfulness?
- What are the challenges to my faith, the sources of doubt and uncertainty?

Scripture Readings on Faith

Luke 1:26–38 Annunciation
Mark 5:24–34 “Your faith has made you well.”
Mark 9:14–24 “I believe; help my unbelief.”
John 11:17–27 Martha’s act of faith

9 Prudence: Discernment/
The Two Standards/
Three Classes of Persons

Consider how Christ calls and desires all persons to come under his standard.

Sp. Ex. 36

The Spiritual Exercises offer a means of discerning God’s will and coming to a life decision. This life decision, what Ignatius calls the Election, is at the heart of the Exercises. On the fourth day of the Second Week of the Exercises, after the reflecting on the Call of the King and contemplating the events of Christ’s birth and hidden life, Ignatius introduces the person to “the consideration of the states of life.”

While continuing our contemplations of Christ’s life, we begin simultaneously to explore and inquire:
In what state or way of life does the Divine Majesty want us to serve him? (Sp. Ex. 135)

Ignatius invites us to make an Exercise that he calls the Two Standards. This is a foundation, background, and horizon against which the decision is to be made. These two standards dramatize the conflicting values and tactics of Christ and the forces of darkness. They bring to consciousness the struggle between good and evil in the world around us and in our own hearts, and between the forces that lead us toward God and the forces that lead us away from God.

The Two Standards: Where Is My Place in the Struggle?

Ignatius has us imagine two great armies: the army of Christ and the army of Satan. Satan is seated on a throne of fire and smoke, an image of the fear that takes away our freedom and enslaves us. Satan entices us to possessions, to great honor, and ultimately to pride. In striking contrast, Christ is sitting in a lowly place: humble, gentle, and attractive. Christ invites us to poverty, rejection, and humility, which lead to freedom.

We pray for the grace to understand these contrasting values and tactics so we can live out of freedom and not be seduced by the false values of the world around us. Our desire is to embrace the values of Christ and turn away from the values of Satan. If our heart is in harmony with the heart of Christ, we will be able to discover his call for us and respond in generosity.

For Ignatius, this cosmic struggle between good and evil is played out both in our hearts and in the larger world. The struggle is waged between light and darkness, between egoism and altruism, and between death and life. Ignatius contrasts riches, honor, and pride with poverty, rejection, and humility.

These simple descriptions point to two contrasting sets of values. Jesus stands for the values of the Gospel, the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount. He calls us to simplicity, poverty of spirit, selflessness, sharing, compassion, cooperation, concern for others, community, inclusion, and solidarity with the poor. In contrast, Satan calls us to consumerism, competition, narcissism, individualism, exclusion, and suspicion of others. The self-centered values of Satan conflict with the Gospel values of Jesus. Jesus is the person for others, the person of compassion who went about helping the poor and the broken. Jesus’ values are those of the Good Samaritan who stops on the road and reaches out in compassion to the person in the ditch. They are the values in the final judgment scene in Matthew when people are asked, “And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” (Matthew 25:38–39). In following Jesus we are invited to live out of these values, to put on the mind and heart of Jesus and to make decisions rooted in those values. We respond generously in the Call of the King to follow Jesus and labor alongside him and carry on the mission of Jesus. Now we have to discover what it means to follow Jesus in our own life circumstances. This decision must flow from a heart in tune with the heart of Christ.

Dean Brackley calls the Two Standards the contrast between the Babylon Project and the Jerusalem Project—the upward mobility of the world and the downward mobility of Jesus. He moves the discussion out of a purely individual realm to the broader social
context. The Babylon Project of Satan includes covetousness, status symbols, the social ladder, arrogant pride, competition, domination, fear and mistrust, and, in the end, cover-up. The Jerusalem Project of Jesus includes faith, indifference to honors, sharing, humility as solidarity, communities of equals, and cooperation. The two projects are played out in societal structures of race, gender, and class. Upward mobility embodies a lack of respect for the dignity of others and disregard for the poor and outcasts. Downward mobility promotes equality, an option for the poor, and a profound sense of solidarity with all people—all essential components of a just society. This larger social context of today’s struggle between good and evil is an indispensable horizon for any genuine apostolic discernment or life decision. We live out our discipleship in both the personal and the social realm.

The Two Standards meditation also describes the tactics of the forces of good and evil. Satan instills in us a desire for possessions, an obsession with the things of the world, a concern for recognition and honor. He seeks a heart enslaved by pride and self-sufficiency. Christ leads us from a poverty of spirit. He fosters a disregard for human honor, a humble heart aware of God’s gifts and free to let go of those gifts and to share them with others.

Three Classes of Persons: How Free Am I?

To make a good decision we need to be free. Ignatius now offers a reflection that explores our freedom to hear and respond to the call of God in our lives. He calls it the Three Classes of Persons.

Three persons each acquire a large sum of money. Each is attached to the sum. They recognize their attachment and desire to be rid of it so that they can serve God freely. Each of the three reacts differently to the situation.

The first person talks about getting rid of the attachment but does nothing about it. This person procrastinates until death.

The second person does everything but the one thing that needs to be done. This person negotiates with God, trying to entice God to come around to his or her way of thinking. The person “wishes to get rid of the attachment, but in such a way that she or he will keep the acquired money; and that thus God will come to where this person desires.” (Sp. Ex. 154) As Ivens puts it, “the second class effectively confines the will of God to the boundaries of their own unfreedom (as opposed to expanding the boundaries of freedom in order to discern the will of God).”

The third person is free. This person “wishes to get rid of the attachment, but in such a way that there remains no inclination either to keep the acquired money or to dispose of it. (Sp. Ex. 155) This person’s only desire is to praise and serve God. This is the person who is willing to sell everything to buy the treasure in the field. This person is free to act out of his or her deepest desires.

This is the grace we are to pray for. The Three Classes meditation is not simply an interesting case study. It is a prayerful exercise that acknowledges that only God can empower our wills to act out of freedom. The grace prayed for is the grace of indifference or freedom to let go of any attachments that would hinder us from embracing God’s will. Ignatius describes the purpose of the Exercises as “to overcome oneself and to order one’s life without reaching a decision through some disordered affection.” (Sp. Ex. 21) As a person moves into the time of election in the retreat, Ignatius returns to this fundamental grace of freedom.
that is an essential prerequisite for making a decision rooted in an attachment to God alone.

Discernment: What Is God's Will for Me?

Ignatius builds on the Two Standards meditation with his Rules for Discernment. These lay out in more detail the subtle movements of these good and evil spirits within us. "Discernment of spirits is the grace Ignatius has you pray for as you ponder these two conflicting mentalities." 4

Discernment is the art and the gift of discovering God's will for us in the concrete circumstances of our lives. David Lonsdale describes discernment as:

[T]he art of appreciating the gifts that God has given us and discovering how we might best respond to that love in our daily life. It is a process of finding one's own way of discipleship in a particular set of circumstances, a means of responding to the call of Christian love and truth in a situation where there are often conflicting interests and values and choices to be made. 5

Discernment is always done in the context of Christian love and seeking truth. It helps us choose that course of action which most authentically answers the deepest desires and longings of our hearts and the movement of the Spirit of God within us.

Discernment presupposes that life is a mystery to be embraced and lived out, not a problem to be solved. It also presupposes that life is a process of growing in a relationship with God, with the world and the people around us, and ultimately with ourselves. The foundation of Ignatius's approach to discernment is the belief that God touches the individual soul, that God is at work in the heart of each individual person.

Some distinguish between discernment of spirits and the discernment of God's will. Discernment of spirits is a process of sifting through the movements of our hearts in order to determine which movements lead us toward God and which movements move us away from God. The discernment of God's will includes this discernment, but also involves considering the Word of God, the teaching of the Church, our gifts, and the responsibilities and commitments of our lives. We need to listen to the voice of the Spirit at work in our hearts, but we also need to be attentive to the Spirit speaking to us through the community and through the realities of our lives.

Ignatius's Rules for Discernment are guidelines to help us be aware of and understand the movements in our hearts so we can be led by the good movements and not be led astray by the evil movements. Ignatius describes them as:

Rules to aid us toward perceiving and then understanding, at least to some extent, the various motions which are caused in the soul: the good motions that they may be received, and the bad that they may be rejected. (Sp. Ex. 313)

The first challenge is to notice, to be attentive. The problem is not that God is silent. The problem is our attentiveness. Usually we
are not paying attention to the interior movements of our hearts. We do not notice the shifting moods of sadness and joy, of anxiety and peace. We do not recognize these affections as the work of the Spirit of God within us and as the voices of darkness that lead us away from the truth. Ignatius offers guidelines that make us more attentive to these movements.

Noticing is not enough. We also need to understand these interior movements. Ignatius calls them consolation and desolation. Consolation is the sense of peace and joy, the attraction to the things of God. It fills our hearts with an experience of God’s love. We grow in faith and hope and love. Desolation is an experience of sadness and anxiety and separation from God. God seems absent and we feel a lack of faith and hope and love. Ignatius counsels us on what to do in times of desolation and consolation. He alerts us to the tactics of the evil spirit and to the deception of false consolation. Ignatius presumed that anyone who is seriously searching for God’s plan will experience these movements of consolation and desolation. He also knew from his own experience that people need help in sifting through these movements. To discover and name these movements of God demands wisdom and sensitivity and openness to God and the direction of others.

How to Make a Decision

Ignatius suggests certain methods and procedures for making a significant life choice. First, all decisions must be made in the light of the end for which we were created. We first focus on the goal of our lives, which is to praise, reverence, and serve God, and only then decide on the means to the goal. We first decide to be disciples of Jesus and then choose how to live out that discipleship in our lives. (Sp. Ex. 169)

There are times when the direction God is calling us is absolutely clear. At other times, we are moved strongly by the spirits instilling feelings of consolation and desolation. At still other times, we are more tranquil and at peace. In these times of tranquility Ignatius tells us to use our reason to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the options before us. He also suggests that we use our imagination. We should ask the questions: What advice would we give others in the same situation? What would we think about this decision if we were looking back on it from the end of our lives? Ignatius thought that some process of discernment would be at the heart of our significant life decisions. It would be unreflective at times, but at other times it would be conscious and measured. His guidelines for discernment enable us and our spiritual guides to be more reflective in following the movements that lead us to wise choices. We seek to act in love and avoid the deceptions that lead us to choices made out of fear and unfreedom. Ignatius challenged us to engage our whole person in making a decision—our intellect, our will, our imagination, as well as our feelings and affections.

The process of discernment and decision-making is not complete until we ask God for confirmation. We bring the decision to God and ask God to affirm it and strengthen us to live it out. We ask: Can I walk with the decision in faith and be at peace with it? The confirmation will come from the peace and harmony we feel with the decision before God. The confirmation will also come from the events and circumstances that support the decision and make living it out possible.
The Virtue of Prudence

We have been exploring how the Spiritual Exercises transform us into a certain kind of person. Here we can see that Ignatius’s focus on discernment and faith-filled decision-making forms us in the virtue of prudence.

The virtue of prudence is often referred to as practical wisdom. Prudence is right judgment about what one should do. As George Evans puts it, “Prudence, the ‘know how’ virtue of the practical intellect, seeks the best way to do the right thing in specific circumstances.” It is the intellectual virtue that enables us to find the right means for a good end. Prudent people make wise choices to promote their personal good and the common good.

Prudence has taken on the connotations of caution and reluctance to act. In fact, prudence implies action that is thoughtful and effective in achieving a goal. Paul Philibert adds that “Prudence connects the everyday with the ultimate. ... (It) knows how to make everything one does serve the overall purpose of life, namely, moving more deeply into God.”

Jim Keenan, in his analysis of the virtue of prudence in Thomas Aquinas, emphasizes the role of this virtue in choosing the proper means:

(Prudence) recognizes the ends to which a person is naturally inclined, it establishes the agenda by which one can pursue those ends, it directs the agent’s own performance of the pursued activity, and finally, it measures the rightness of the actions taken. Prudence, in short, guides the agent to living a self-directed life that seeks integration.

This connection to the ultimate end and purpose of life resonates with Ignatius’s emphasis on choosing the best means to achieve our final end. Prudence presupposes the freedom fostered in the Exercises and gives priority to the end over the means. Prudence would also make decisions formed by the values of Christ presented in the meditation on the Two Standards. The prudent person will not be led astray by the deceits of the spirit of darkness.

The prudent person is also open to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The traditional seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are wisdom, knowledge, understanding, counsel, fortitude, piety, and fear of the Lord. These gifts are supernatural dispositions of the soul that make the soul receptive and docile to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. They facilitate the operation of the virtues by moving us beyond our rational faculties and opening us to the movement and inspiration of grace in our hearts.

Prudence, Wisdom, and the Art of Discernment

The gift of wisdom is closely related to the virtue of prudence and the art of discernment. Wisdom empowers us to taste and savor the things of God. It is a knowledge born of love that allows us to know what leads us toward God and what leads us away from God. It makes us sensitive to the movements of God in our hearts and in our world. It implies a familiarity with God and the ways of God that is the fruit of prayer. Wisdom is the gift of the Spirit that attunes our heart to the heart of God and puts us in harmony with God and God’s desires. In this way, it brings to fullness the virtue of prudence.

Prudence and discernment are closely related. A discerning person is a prudent person. The gift of wisdom takes the natural
As a person grows in the gift of wisdom and grows in the art of discernment, the person grows in prudence. All of this is the work of the Spirit that is fostered through meditation and contemplative prayer. One of the fruits of the Exercises is a growth in prudence, wisdom, and discernment. In the Exercises one prays for the gift of discernment. One might pray as well for wisdom and prudence. The Gospel parable of the wise and foolish virgins reminds us that following Jesus demands wisdom and prudence, as well as love and simplicity.

Reflecting on Prudence
- How can I be more attentive to the voice of God in my life?
- What are the values that shape my judgments and decisions?
- In my life, what are the obstacles to freedom that keep me from responding to God’s call in love?
- How can I grow in wisdom and a discerning heart?

Scripture Readings on Prudence
Deuteronomy 4: 5–8 A wise and discerning people
Deuteronomy 30:11–20 The word is very near to me
Galatians 5:16–25 The fruits of the Spirit
Romans 11:33–36 The wisdom and knowledge of God