

# All My Liberty

## Chapter 7: The Retreat Election

*Fr. John A. Hardon, S.J.*

Although the Election is not a special meditation, it is by all odds the most important single exercise of an Ignatian retreat. Whatever precedes, should prepare the exercitant to choose according to the highest motives; what follows will confirm the object of his choice. Some idea may be gained of the importance which St. Ignatius attached to the Election from the amount of space he devoted to its exposition: twenty pages of text in the *Monumenta Ignatiana*, or more than the Two Standards, Three Classes, and the Three Modes of Humility combined.

If there is one basic difference between the Spiritual Exercises and any other retreat method approved by the Church, it is the Election.

Fundamentally, the subject matter of the Election should be something good or indifferent in itself, and not opposed to the will of God. It may be the prospect of a new state of life, say, the priesthood, but not necessarily. It may be an improvement in the vocation that a person has already chosen, with a focus on that part of the spiritual life which needs special attention.

As will be apparent from the description which follows, the Election has universal applicability, ranging from an original decision to embrace a new mode of life, to improving one's conduct in a single area of a state already permanently undertaken. Correlative to the wide scope of subject matter are the kinds of people who can make the Election. In a sense, no one is excluded, although this requires explanation.

Strictly speaking, the object of an Election should be the evangelical counsels, undertaken, improved or reinvigorated, as the case may be.

Since everyone, even lay persons, has been called to Christian perfection according to his state of life, the Ignatian Election pertains to anyone who has the grace of living out the counsels, whether in the world, in the priesthood, or under religious vows.

St. Ignatius prudently takes account of those who for some reason are incapable of making a regular Election, by providing them with "a method of amending and reforming their manner of life." Decisions made according to this method presume that a permanent vocation has already been embraced. The method itself primarily concerns people living in the world (whether laymen or priests) and stresses the right disposition of their external mode of life, in the use of temporal goods and the active apostolate. Particularly suited for those who make only a short retreat of two or three days, it cannot be given the full sweep of Christological motivation as conceived by the Exercises. Yet the scope of decision is practically unlimited: how to improve spiritually in one's profession or present employment, how to guide and direct those under authority, how to give an example of effective Christian living, how to apportion one's income between personal and family needs and the legitimate demands of charity.

The wide range of subjects on which the Election can be made has more than academic value. It neutralizes the suspicion, sometimes raised, about the usefulness of the Exercises for those who are already established in a fixed state of life or who are not bound by religious vows.

An excellent statement of the scope of the Election is given by Suarez, when treating of the function of the Spiritual Exercises:

Although one of the principal ends of the Spiritual Exercises is the election of a better state of life, they are by no means intended to have every retreatant choose the religious state. Unquestionably this way of life is more perfect in itself, but it may not be better for the one

making the Election; and everyone should choose what is better for him. Not all people have the grace of this vocation and consequently should either choose another or at least adopt a mode of living that is more conducive to salvation. A religious, therefore, should no longer deliberate about a state of life; but he may well deliberate on how best to live in his vocation. Or, if that has been adequately considered, how to invigorate his motivation ... how to become more diligent in overcoming obstacles and, in general, how to grow daily in performing actions that are most consistent with his religious profession. Lay people, too, even if they are going to remain in the world, have need of this help in order to obtain additional grace from God and prepare themselves to meet the dangers among which they live. [1]

Suarez, therefore, would have everyone make the Election, at least in a modified form, as St. Ignatius himself provides in a special method for reforming one's state of life.

## Time and Method

St. Ignatius distinguishes three periods in a man's life, which may be repeated, when "a sound and good Election can be made." They are called "times" to describe the occasion when a person has certain internal experiences that are suitable for making an important decision in the presence of God. All three come within the ambit of the Exercises, but not all are equally practical or reliable for most exercitants.

*First Time.* When God our Lord so moves and attracts the will that a devout soul, without hesitation, or the possibility of hesitation, follows what has been manifested to it. St. Paul and St. Matthew acted thus in following Christ our Lord.

In the nature of things, an Election rarely occurs under these circumstances. It represents a miraculous grace that should neither be asked for nor expected from God. When received, the will

becomes almost passive and spontaneously responds to the efficacious action of the Holy Spirit.

*Second Time.* When much light and understanding are derived through the experience of desolations and consolations, and discernment of diverse spirits.

This happens more frequently and, in fact, whenever inspirations and internal movements of the soul are so strong that, with a minimum of intellectual effort, the will is moved to a generous service of God. At times the consolation-experience (or its opposite) may practically equate the "first time." But normally the mind will have to exert itself to arrive at a moral decision, by distinguishing the positive sentiments of divine encouragement from the negative ones of human and diabolical despondency.

*Third Time.* This is a time of tranquility. First a man reflects why he was born, namely, to praise God and save his soul. With the desire to attain this end before his mind, he chooses as a means to the end a manner or state of life recognized by the Church that will help him in the service of God our Lord and the salvation of his soul.

In contrast with the preceding, this is the most ordinary and generally the most secure time for reaching a decision. Certainly it becomes highly effective when used to confirm the "second time," which depends on the discernment of spirits. Here the dominant attitude towards God is very active in using one's natural powers assisted by grace, before, during and after a decision has been reached. It also implies a certain trust in God's providence that needs to be stressed because, by supposition, I have less tangible evidence of the divine will in the absence of strong supernatural stimuli or of conflicting spiritual forces, as happens in the first and second "times."

Two extensive methods are provided for making the Election, and both refer to the “third time,” when the soul peacefully reflects on its relations with God and “is not agitated by different spirits, but has the free and tranquil use of its natural powers.” The value of these methods transcends their immediate function in the Exercises, since they can be used all through life – in modified, capsule form – to make any decision in the spiritual life, on any subject, and practically under any circumstances.

*First Method:* There are six steps in the first method, which follow in sequence from intellectual reflection, through prayer for light and strength, to a final decision offered to Almighty God.

The first step is “to place before my mind the object about which I want to make a choice.” Characteristically, this initial requisite is to be supplied by the human exercitant, using the basic human faculty on which rests the whole supernatural life. The intellect isolates the area of decision.

The next step is also a mental operation: to focus my attention on the end for which I was created, along with any activity of will which is the fruit of all the preceding meditations. I put myself into a state of indifference, “like a balance at equilibrium,” without leaning in favor of either side of the choice I am about to make.

At this stage, St. Ignatius requires a prayer of petition asking God “to deign to move my will and bring to my mind what I ought to do to promote His praise and glory.” This is an essential condition because the matter in question is tied up with a supernatural end which cannot be attained without supernatural grace, and refers to the unknown future in which only God can direct my present decision in a way that will produce optimum results.

After prayer, I weigh the pros and cons, preferably written out in parallel columns, of the

prospective Election. Spelling out the subject in this way has the advantage of reducing the whole problem to digestible size and allowing the mind to grasp all the main aspects in one intellectual glance. It also helps keep out extraneous factors which do not bear on the main issue and tend to obscure the judgment by appealing to the negative emotions of diffidence and fear.

Following this evaluation, the mind presents to the will what is obviously the most satisfactory choice to make. Then the classic Ignatian counsel: “I must come to a decision in the matter under deliberation because of weightier motives offered to my reason and not because of any sensual inclination.” By insisting on the absolute necessity of coming to a decision, St. Ignatius cuts through the inveterate human tendency to procrastinate, especially in the larger issues of a man’s life. And by laying down the rational norm for making a decision he eliminates the corresponding temptation to follow one’s emotions, howsoever disguised, in choosing the best course of action on the road to salvation.

Finally another recourse to prayer, but only to offer a finished Election to God and ask Him to “confirm it if it is for His greater service and praise.” The qualifying “if” is not a rhetorical flourish but shows the absence of any presumption that after all this scrutiny whatever I decide must be pleasing to the Divine Majesty. It is also an expression of confidence that providence is leading me to my appointed end, after I have done my part in finding the will of God.

*Second Method:* The alternate method of making an Election is somewhat shorter and approaches the problem from a different angle. It is more personal, psychological, and likely more appealing to many people. It is also more direct and dispenses with the minutiae of the first method, which makes it invaluable for settling those frequent, quick decisions that are part of our daily life.

Before deciding on a given question, first examine if your affection for a person, place, or course of action is dictated solely by the will of God. Do not proceed with a decision until this point is assured.

Place yourself in the position of another man with your choice to make. What advice would you give him? Give yourself the same.

Place yourself at the moment of death and consider what decision you would then wish to have made. Make the same now.

Place yourself on Judgment Day and ask yourself what choice you would then wish to have made. Choose that course of action now.

After reaching a decision, offer the choice to God in Prayer, asking Him to confirm it by His grace as in the previous method.

## Election Compared to a Conversion

There is more than academic reason for comparing the Ignatian Election to a moral conversion. *Metanoia* or reformation of life runs as a theme through the pages of the Gospels; it is the object of Christ's exhortation in the Apocalypse of St. John; the Church's liturgy often exhorts us to turn away from creatures and be converted to God; and modern asceticism emphasizes the need of converting one's spiritual life by sublimating natural tendencies.

Comparing the Election with conversion does not imply that the two are coextensive. They are quite different in many ways, and yet their several points of contact should help to understand the Election in the more familiar terms of Scripture and Christian piety.

*Implied Antecedents:* The Election implies that a person's life is at least in some area not as perfectly dedicated to God as it might be;

whereas a conversion suggests that the life is somehow or somewhat estranged from God.

*Dominant Mode of Operation:* While there are notable exceptions, at least the most common form of Election stresses the effort of the human mind and will, relying on the grace of God. In a conversion, however, the accent is on the operation of divine grace, which requires more or less cooperation on the part of the one converted.

*Substantial Elements:* The Election is essentially a decision to make a change for the better in one's relations with God. A conversion is the actual change in relation to God, which may be: from disbelief to the fullness of the Catholic faith; from a life of sin to friendship with God; from mediocrity to ordinary piety; from ordinary piety to uncommon sanctity.

*Time Factor:* Election may involve a sudden decision to change, certainly in the so-called "first time" of St. Ignatius. But normally it comes only after long reflection and prayer. A conversion, on the other hand, may be long-delayed and have a backlog of dispositive circumstances, but the actual moral change (as described by converts even among the saints) is a rather sudden occurrence in the person's life.

*Relation to Each Other:* An Election may be considered an inchoate conversion, from a less perfect to a more perfect service of God. A conversion, except in the case of a moral miracle, is the result of at least an implicit decision to serve God more faithfully.

*Element of Change:* In the Election, the object of the moral change is something spiritually better in preference to what is merely good. In a conversion, it is implied that the one being converted is leaving what is somehow evil to embrace something that is good.

As found in the Scriptures and elsewhere, conversion has only the generic concept of turning away from creatures and coming back to

God. But the Election of the Exercises is much more refined. It supposes that a man is basically in God's friendship and yet unduly attached to certain created things. His decision, therefore, is to be *more* diverted from creatures and to the extent *more* converted to God.

### Chapter 7 **References**

[1] Francis Suarez, *De Religione*, Lib. IX, cap. 7, num. 15.

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