

Do you ever read advice columns? We used to call them “Dear Abbey” columns. There’s one in the New York Times Sunday Magazine I sometimes read (although, being the NYT, it’s called an “ethics” column). Last week it included such questions as, “Should I turn in my Tax-Cheating Relative?” and “Is it OK to report a teacher at my child’s school for not helping another child enough?” The thing about such columns is that they rarely tell us about the advisor’s underlying philosophy on which the advice is based. But that’s crucial if we hope to get any real help for our own life from reading the columns. If we don’t begin with correct first principles we won’t end up with good decisions.

Priests sometimes play the Dear Abby role for parishioners. So today I want to give you some basic points of how we Catholics should go about making decisions in life, coming from the teachings of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the Founder of the Jesuits.

We all have trouble making the right decisions in life. Who to date, who to marry? Am I called to marriage, or to the religious life?

What job should I take. Should I leave my job, change career? And there are the countless smaller, daily decisions as well, like the ones in the advice columns. What about that tax-cheating cousin?

Ignatius says the first thing to do in making a good decision is what the media advisors fail to do, get our first principles clear. Ignatius called his starting point the “Principle and Foundation.” It’s the starting point for every God-based decision, what a Catholic needs to assume at the beginning of every moral discernment question. It goes like this:

“God created us out of love so that we might praise and reverence his infinite love and goodness, and by dedicating our lives to his service might enter an eternity of joyful communion with him. God created all the other things on earth for us, to help us attain this purpose for which he created us.

Therefore, we should appreciate and use these gifts of God – positions, occupations, relationships, material possessions, and all the other blessings of God’s creation – insofar as they help toward the

purpose for which we are created, and we should let them go insofar as they hinder our attainment of this purpose.

Consequently, in choices in which we are free to choose among various options, we must hold ourselves as in a balance with regard to these gifts of God's creation. This means that for our part we do not set our desires on health rather than sickness, wealth rather than poverty, being held in honor rather than in little esteem, a long life rather than a short life, and likewise in all the rest.

Our only desire and choice should be for what better leads us to the purpose for which God created us: to praise and serve him in this life, and so enter the joy of eternal life."

Those basic truths of are the foundation of all good Catholic decision making. And that brings me back to the Gospel. "You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do." Today Peter rebukes Jesus when Jesus told the Apostles that He was going up to be killed in Jerusalem. "God forbid, Lord!" Peter thinks he himself knows

the best plan for his life, better than Jesus does. And Peter's sure the cross couldn't and shouldn't be part of the plan. Those mistaken assumptions are what Jesus means when He says Peter is thinking as human beings do, not as God does. Whereas Ignatius' Foundation fits Jesus' teaching here. The cross Jesus mentions to the Apostles could be the sickness, poverty, lack of esteem that Ignatius mentions as equally good possibilities in life – if they are God's means to our holiness.

If we are to decide according to God will, then in some situations we will have to embrace the cross He holds out to us. How are we to discern that? Ignatius gives four ways to help us make good decisions.

First, recall and re-commit to the Principle and Foundation. Do I believe what it says? If I don't believe in its teachings and don't base my decision upon its truths, then I won't end up doing God's will, because those are the truths God Himself starts and operates from.

Second, Ignatius says, think about the decision I'm facing, and then choose a man on the street whom I have never met, but desiring

all perfection for him, consider what I would tell him to do regarding this matter for the greater glory of God and the greater happiness of his soul if it was his decision, not mine: and then do the same myself

Third, imagine I was on my death bed. What action would I then wish to have chosen in making the present decision, and then so act.

Fourth, imagine myself on the day of my judgment, to think of what decision I would wish to have made about the present question as I stand Before Jesus on that day, and adopt now that action I then would have wished to have done, that I might find myself full of joy in eternity. Such are some of Ignatius' rules for discernment.

So, think about the decisions you face right now. In addressing them are you thinking as God does, or as human beings do? Could you discern with St. Ignatius's rules? What are the philosophical principles behind our decisions in life? It takes time, faith, courage, and humility to let God guide our decisions. But that's the only way to lasting happiness. Resurrection and ever-lasting life consists in doing God's will

in all things. And God's will, and heaven, often run through the Cross.

Jesus knew that truth – and died for it. Peter eventually learned it, and

did the same. In our own decisions today, this week, this year, are we

going to think as human beings do – or as God does?

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