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DESIRES AS MARKS OF THE SPIRIT

(Written after hearing confessions in the College student's chapel of the Ateneo de Manila University)

Religious Novices experience God in a “first” fervor. The “born-again” feel God there inside and all about themselves. Charismatics are experientially immersed in the Spirit. There are highs in the life of a Christian, especially in beginnings. There are even intellectual illuminations for some. These highs during which one seems to sense or feel the presence of the Spirit are signs of the Spirit’s presence. So too the illuminations. Neither seems to last for long, however, and many are saddened by the apparent absence of the Spirit because these intense signs are no longer perceived.

In this writer’s opinion the normal signs of the Spirit’s presence for most of us most of the time are good desires with or without warm feelings. I would go further and say that as life goes on and first fervors become memories, the experience of God would seem to consist simply in these desires without feelings of fervor. As a matter of fact, at times they will be present with feelings contrary to the good desires that endure through the dry and uphill spiritual journey. Even when a young student or an older person expresses regret that there are no more signs of God’s presence, we can often detect a forcefully active presence through good desires that do not go away. The active presence of the Spirit continues. Only the signs have changed.

These desires can be for one’s own transformation, for the transformation of society, for the good of those who are loved or the good of those given over to our care. Even feeling bad can uncover good desires and the Spirit’s presence. One feels bad because of doing the opposite of what one desires. For example a person is pained because he wants to support others but finds himself judgmental.

These desires, placed there by the Spirit, vary in intensity. Sometimes they are so strong that the difficult in Christian life becomes easy. Burdens are eased. It appears that when we are called to renewal, we are being called to the desires that once filled our sails and made Christian voyaging smooth. At least we are being called to a toughness of desire that supports Christian living even in darkness or when we are seemingly be-calmed. It can be a matter either of brisk-wind sailing or hard work at the oars. There are times when I have been disconcerted, sometimes discouraged by being blamed for my lack of fervor or my scant renewal. Yet fervor comes from desire and the desire I am speaking of is Spirit-produced. I should not be blamed or scolded. We are speaking of a free gift.

Since these desires are such a precious gift, they should be attended to. It seems true enough to say that much prayer and self-examination consists in attending to these desires and simply resting in desire. St. Ignatius asks over and over that we should ask for what we desire. I believe that at least as one gets older, Ignatius would be content if we just consciously desire what we desire in the belief that God is attending to our longings. No need for verbally asking. We might simply want as God attends to our wanting. Such wanting or desiring in his presence constitutes good prayer. There is no need to tell God what he already knows.

Just a word about Christian asceticism. It occurs to me that central to Christian striving is that a person make efforts to narrow the gap between desire and behavior. An integration would result. A person would live as he or she deeply wishes to live. He or she would behave according to the desires within. Another aspect of asceticism will respond to what seems a reality in the life of most. In one's interior, next to good desires, we find other good desires and others that are bad and still others which are trivial distractions. Within any of us there is often a conflict of desires. The ascetic has to deal with this conflict between wheat and cockle. He or she will have to do some digging. The image of the meticulous archaeologist comes to mind. He digs, he dusts, he scrapes and chips away to make appear clearly the valued potsherd or tool. The Christian ascetic in me digs and scrubs to cause to surface the authentic desire which is very likely covered over by other longings and whims.

All this points to the meaning of discernment. We cannot presume that all desires that seem good are in fact good. Likewise we cannot presume that God wants us to follow even all good desires. We might be called to follow one among several. The skilled "dis-

cerner” begins with clear awareness of his desires and then sifts through them until he finds the one or ones that reveal themselves as genuinely God-implanted. This discerner will have to apply some tests to the desires, tests from God’s Word. I have found in the following words of David Lonsdale a description I see as helpful. They are found in his contribution to Sheldrake’s The Way of Ignatius Loyola. The meaning of desires and affective movements are not identical but desires do certainly fit under affective movements.

It (discernment) is rather a matter of noting significant affective movements in a person’s experience and the perceptions, decisions and courses of action associated with these, and through that observation to try to perceive the leading of the Spirit of God and the resistances to that leading that might be operating.

Christian life must have the development of such a discerning habit as an essential effort. A way of engaging daily in the Ignatian Examen needs to be found by anyone who wants to discover and follow God-inspired desires or, in other words, to be controlled by God’s Spirit who speaks through our authentic desires.

This paper will end with a very few remarks about: 1) Vocation, 2) Freedom and 3) Spiritual Direction.

I have heard people say that someone has a vocation from God but does not want it. This I find unacceptable. I can easily understand that a person may experience desires contrary to a vocation from God. I can also see a person unfaithful to a call. However, it seems clear to me that the conscious element in a vocation will be precisely a desire that persists even amidst infidelity and contrary desires. The struggle, if such there be, will be between desires within me, not between some sort of external call and my resisting desires. To be called by God is something one will experience as an interior desire.

After a person’s struggle to be controlled by God, one finds that he or she has become eminently free. To be free is to be controlled by God. To be controlled by other humans can be an enslavement. Not so control by God. God has placed within us ineradicable desires which are at the deepest and most authentic level of ourselves. When we follow these desires we are doing what we most want to do. We are doing our own will. We are free. We are doing what we want.

And what we want is what God wants and implants in us. God's control is our freedom.

We all need to grow in the ability to become aware of our desires, articulate them, place them in priority and measure our lives against the more authentic ones. This may well be the core of spiritual direction. We could talk to ourselves about this but articulation seems to come off best when addressed to another who listens, supports, and questions; one who desires with us to follow rather than lead the Spirit.

BACK TO TABLE OF CONTENTS