

Choosing Well

From the First Principle and Foundation of the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*:

Humans are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to attain salvation... Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we are created.

I was in Mexico once and I needed soap. So, I went to the store down the street. There were two kinds of soap. Either one would do the job, so it was easy to pick one.

If I have to pick between two kinds of ice cream, the choice might be harder to make. If I have to buy one of two cars, the choice becomes harder still. As the stakes get higher, more thought has to go into the choice. We call this basic discernment. And the more complicated the choices, the harder is it to choose. Ignatius found in his own life that good discernment was of the utmost importance if we are to make good choices in important matters.

I was thinking about this recently as I studied the political news coming at me. How is it that people can be so quick to make a choice, when the choices are so complicated. I think the answer is because, like the simplicity of choosing a bar of soap, we want things to be simpler and easier to select. That seems to have become the "American way" of doing things: the simpler, the better.

Taking that idea—that we want simple choices—I think we have fallen into the trap of simplistic thinking), or as I call it, "black and white" thinking. Things are either this or they're that. We don't seem to like the process that's involved in making a difficult decision. Hard choices should involve good discernment. But humans have never been good choosers. I see it every day on the news and in the street. Bad choices.

Making a good choice in important matters requires first, that we acknowledge our bias: I lean to one side or another. Second, we have to gather as much objective information as possible and throw that into the mix. Then, we have to go through the evaluation process, the judging of all the information. And this is where we fall flat on our faces. Our biases prevent us from properly judging the information we gather. So our choices will always skew in the direction of our desires. Nothing new here.

We look at the high divorce rate and wonder why. Poor choosing. Why so much drug addiction? Poor choosing. Why such divided politics? Poor choosing. It seems we have forgotten how and why to think well, to properly judge what is being said to us, and to evaluate what the best choice might be.

As I thought about my own way of making choices, I always consider the consequences of my actions. I also consider who I claim to be. In short, I try my best to evaluate all the information. Of course, that evaluation takes place in a flash although some decisions do demand a great deal more reflection than other decisions. As the choice becomes more complicated and more consequential, the choice becomes harder to make.

But then, try as I might, other ways of thinking trip me up. Things like jumping to conclusions and thinking in terms of "black and white." Developmental psychologist Jean Piaget "mapped" how children think. What he discovered was that the thinking categories of childhood do not serve adults very well. In particular, he pointed out these styles of thinking:

- **Jumping to Conclusions**
- **Narrow Mindedness**
- **Playing the "blame game"**

- **Personalizing**
- **Making mountains out of molehills**
- **Black and White thinking**
- **Blocking out past positive examples**

If we pay attention to what St. Ignatius was saying, we see that these ways of thinking don't fit healthy discernment and decision making. In addition, if we look at how Jesus wanted his followers to treat one another, those categories mentioned above also have no place. I am sad to say that I often miss the mark.