



HELP WITH DIFFICULT DECISIONS

In both today's first reading and Gospel some people are being challenged to make an important decision. In the first reading, Joshua, Moses' successor, challenges his people to decide to follow the God of Israel or the gods of their neighbors in Canaan. Addressing the gathered assembly, Joshua says to them, "*decide today whom you will serve. . .*" Then, by way of example, and not by coercion, Joshua announces his own decision. "*As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord!*" This is not only a decision for the Lord, but a beautiful example of a leader setting a good example for his family and people to follow.

In the Gospel today, people are also faced with an important decision. Jesus has just concluded his long discourse on the Bread of Life. During the discourse he tells the people that he is Bread from heaven and if they are going to inherit eternal life they must eat his body and drink his blood. Such cannibalistic words were too much for many people—including some of Jesus' own disciples. They said, "*this saying is too hard; who can accept it?*" We notice that Jesus made no attempt to water down what he had said. John then says, "*as a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.*" We can only imagine the impact the *decision* had on their lives.

Life is full of decisions

From the time we get up in the morning until we go to bed at night we make many decisions. It has been said that we are the sum total of our decisions. *When we make a decision, we are writing another line in the script of our lives.* Daily we make all kinds of decisions that impact our *health*, our *relationships* (with others and self), our *character* and so on. Daily we make decisions how we use our *time, treasure and talent*. Some decisions can have some very long-term effects on our lives, e.g., choosing the person we will or will not marry, our choice of career, a medical choice. Other choices can be very traumatic and difficult, e.g., a pregnant woman discovers that the child she is carrying has some serious physical or mental defect. Should she carry the preborn child to full term or terminate the pregnancy? Should a woman who has had a very difficult pregnancy be open to having another child? Should one stay in a marriage that is loveless? The decision to place a loved one in a long-

term nursing facility is often very heart wrenching. The decision to withdraw life-support systems from a family member who has no hope of recovering is also very difficult. We might say that nothing impacts our lives more than the *decisions* that we make, especially the difficult ones and the ones with far-reaching effects.

When it comes to the difficult decisions in our lives most of us would like to be able to pick up the phone and dial God so that we could ask him what choice we should make in this particular situation. Often we assume that what we want or what God might want for us is in conflict. That is not necessarily true. We can always assume that God *only* wants our happiness and what is best for us. In John 10:10, Jesus tells us he come so that we might have 'life in its full abundance'. Spiritual directors like to point out that what we most deeply desire in our hearts is also what God wants for us. The difficulty is getting at what we most *deeply* desire – a whole other topic.

Five suggestions when dealing with difficult decisions

The *first suggestion* is to pray for guidance and openness to whatever God may ask of us. In some situations this will be very hard because our minds and hearts may be set on a particular direction. For example, if a married man falls in love with a woman other than his wife, he will, most likely, find it very hard to hear God call him back to his wife. Because I like Ascension parish very much, I would find it hard to hear God call me to another place. Our *attachment* to a particular place or relationship or job would usually make it very hard for us to have what St. Ignatius calls "interior freedom" when it comes to discernment or decisions. In other words, how *free* are we to go in whatever direction *God* may point us? Probably not very free if our minds and hearts are set on going in *one* particular direction. Of course, the direction we have in mind may be the direction that God also wants for us. So, as we face some difficult decision it is very important that we not only pray for guidance and openness but also for *inner freedom*.

A *second suggestion* is to take a piece of paper and jot down the pros and cons of particular options available to us. When I was invited to consider coming to Ascension parish, I was quite happy where I was and had no desire to leave my previous parish. But I knew that I needed to

pray about the decision. So one of the steps that I took was naming the pros and cons of why I did and did not want to come to Ascension. After I was finished this step I quickly realized that all my reasons for wanting to stay where I was were somewhat selfish. So after praying a little more, I quickly realized that God was calling me to pull up roots and move south. I am glad that I did. In drawing up our list of pros and cons, it might be a good idea to enlist the help of others. Sometimes we may be blind to aspects of the decision facing us that others may see quite clearly.

A *third suggestion* is to take time to pray with our list of pros and cons. As we sit with each side of an issue we can check how we feel. We may want to sit with one side of the issue for a few days. Do we feel peaceful or honest, especially when we have a strong attachment to one particular option. As we struggle with a particular option, it is helpful for us to distinguish how we feel *during* prayer as opposed to how we feel *outside* of prayer. Sometimes the doubt and confusion that we feel occurs *outside* of prayer. We would do well to trust more what we think and feel while we are in prayer and most open to hearing God's voice.

A *fourth suggestion* is to discuss the decision with others. We could talk to friends who know us well and are willing to tell us what they truly think, and not what they think *we* want to hear. We may want to speak with a counselor. What is important is to talk and listen to someone who will be *objective* with us.

A *fifth suggestion* is to go through three imaginative exercises recommended by St. Ignatius of Loyola (founder of the Jesuits).

- First, he suggests that we consider what advice we would give to another person faced with our situation. Sometimes it is interesting how clear our situation becomes when we picture someone else facing the same decision.
- Second, we could imagine being on our deathbed and then asking what we would have chosen.
- Third, we could picture ourselves standing before God on the last day and then consider what decision we would like to have made in the present matter.

The latter two suggestions are pretty heavy ones, but perhaps they might waken us up to the seriousness of our decisions.

Decision Time

Finally, we have to make a decision of some kind. It may be to take more time with the issue, placing it on hold for some time, or we may decide to go in one particular direction even though we are not at all sure that we are making the right decision. St. Ignatius counsels us not to

decide while in doubt. (The assumption here is that we are in a position to wait). The next step is to *act* on our decision. This can be a difficult step.

Acting on What We Decide

Sometimes we can be quite clear on what we need to do, but we may find it very hard to do it. For example, a family may decide that they need to confront the abuse of alcohol, but they may find it extremely difficult to do what they know in their hearts is the right thing. A man (or woman) may know that the right thing to do is to break off an extra-marital affair and return to his/her spouse but they may have a very hard time actually doing what they know in their hearts is the right thing. Here prayer is crucial. We should pray for the grace to do what we believe is the right thing.

As we carry out our decision, we may wonder some months later if we made the right choice. One way to check is to ask ourselves if our choice brings us peace and is life-giving for us. Of course there may be days when we experience a lot of conflict and struggle and wonder if we really made the right decision. Such difficult days and feelings are normal and do not necessarily prove that we made a wrong decision. As I just said, if our decision gives us a sense of *peace* and *life*, then we have two good reasons to believe that we acted in accord with God's will. On the other hand, if our chosen direction gives us little or no peace and drains the life out of us, then there is reason to believe that we may not have made a good decision. This raises the difficult question: what if we discover or believe strongly that we made the wrong decision? If we prayed about our decision and made an honest effort to seek God's will, we can be very sure that God is pleased with us. As in everything else we do, the art of good decision-making is developed by trial and error and, of course, with the grace of God. Also, it has been well said that there is only one real mistake and this is the one we keep repeating and learn nothing from. The Lord doesn't ask that we always be right; he only asks that we try our best and act out of the best understanding we have of a particular situation. Also, our God is so creative that he is always 'writing straight with crooked lines.' Some of our best lessons are learned in the detours of life's journey.

If you know of someone facing a difficult decision, consider sharing this column with them

Have a blessed week,

