

over past hurts, nursing them and throwing blame around in a way which is destructive rather than constructive both for herself and for others. It can sound virtuous at times and is often both politically and theologically correct but essentially it lacks that quality of gentleness which is characteristic of God. People under its influence have a tendency to become more and more remote from the christian community until, in extreme cases, they lose contact with it. In the language of Ignatius, it is like water dropping on a stone.

And this movement has one other distinctive quality which shows it up as not of God, and that is the unreal, illusory nature of it. It is as if the clock can somehow be put back. As if half a lifetime can be written off so as to start again from scratch. This illusion is perhaps more common in men who deal with the questions of mid-life by giving up all their responsibilities and going off with a woman young enough to be their daughter. But this illusion can strike at any of us and sometimes during the Spiritual Exercises I have seen it slip quietly into the thoughts and prayers of several women. There may, of course, be situations where some radical new beginning is called for, but generally speaking I think the will of God for us starts from where we are now and not from where we were twenty-five years ago.

### Consolation Returns

Once this desolation has been identified and recognized for what it is then true consolation can return. It does not live in the past but looks to the present and the immediate future in a way that is positive, hopeful and faith-filled. There is no time wasted on recrimination and blame and there is a sense of tolerance and humour in the face of life in general and men and the church in particular. There is an ability to live with tensions which are not immediately resolved but which, like some spirits in the gospel, can only be dealt with through prayer and a kind of fasting from things as we would like them to be. The preceding desolation is heavy and always serious whereas the consolation has a lightness about it and an ability to laugh and celebrate which have the feel of God about them. I see many such women around the parish, women who continue to show a great capacity to serve which is at times astonishing. But there is nothing servile about this service. It is not the fruit of the lie we began with but is the fruit of growing freedom. It is service in imitation of Jesus who came not to be served but to serve and I thank God for all that he has done and is doing through such women in this parish.

## Choices, Choices

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Catherine Quinn SHCJ

**N**O MATTER WHO we are or where we are, we make daily decisions. In being truly human we choose and our choices cover a broad spectrum of life experience. Most of our lives are very ordinary and our choices seem almost casual. Occasionally, however, life presents us with the need for a profoundly serious decision. At these times we can be brought up short. We are prompted to ponder not only the options but the very manner in which we make an option.

Perhaps the ruminations shared here may provide a low key stimulus to review procedures in day by day decision-making. Hopefully these ideas may persuade us of the significance of daily choosing as a preparation for the occasional monumental moment of choosing.

No matter how our decisions are made (and even whether they are made consciously) they are affected by various attitudes and assumptions. These fundamental perspectives include such diverse inner dispositions as a sense of willing responsibility for particular situations or persons, the cultivation of maturity in decision-making through reflection and prayer, a realization that in the context of God's presence we have been blessed or burdened (depending on one's outlook) with the ability to choose for ourselves, and the readiness of heart, no matter what the situation, to exercise this talent.

All of us face more decisions and make more choices day in and day out than we usually think about. Many are seemingly inconsequential: taking the dog for a walk, buying a phone, failing to meet a timeline for exercise, or choosing the vegetables we cook. Other choices have more significance: our manner of greeting the people we meet in the elevator or in the bus line. Some choices are as attractive as an afternoon off. Others are as distasteful as emptying a trash basket. But whatever the choice, a single yes means a thousand no's. The very process of decision-making gives texture and flavor to life.

The appearance of sameness in daily life exercises a subtle seduction. It leads us to presume that what one feels and thinks today is

not very important for, after all, it appears to be a simple repetition of yesterday.

How then do we maintain energy and interest in the ordinary options of an ordinary day? It becomes necessary to cultivate habits of the heart. Good habits of the heart keep us out of a rut. They are formed by the Holy Spirit especially in the time of prayer and most specifically in prayerful reflection and examination of daily life. Many decent people pray regularly. They turn to God in thanksgiving and in need but they neglect the discipline of examination of both prayer and life. Time spent in reflection fosters good habits of the heart which in turn help us to make good daily choices. Among the habits of the heart that are significant for decision-making a few deserve special notice.

An *attentive heart* is one attuned to reality and one which seeks truth. Interior discipline keeps one attentive to life, to mystery. An attentive heart catches the sparkle in the eye of another and chooses to respond with a smile. A moment of joy is created and shared by mutual consent. The attentive heart can also slough off the small self-deceptions and denials of reality that can be like a cancer eating away at integrity. The acknowledgement of the giving or receiving of even a slight becomes necessary because the conscious denial of a peccadillo dulls the heart. Respect for reality means accepting the truth of both the positive and negative aspects of an experience. Sometimes it is easier (seemingly) to accept the positive and deny the negative. At other times it is simpler to do battle with the negative and not acknowledge the positive. Indeed, it is often more satisfying to hold one view exclusively rather than attend to the fragments of truth in opposing views. But the interior denial of one or the other has the potential to move a person towards intransigence and even violence. Reflection under the guidance of the Holy Spirit enables us to see the possibilities of truth or falsehood; we can find depth or beauty in even a daily greeting given or withheld. The exchange of courtesies or sharing of tasks becomes a mini-adventure in creativity.

As we venture into the day with an attentive heart we find we have been blessed with a heart that is also ready.

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*A ready heart* is one that easily accepts responsibility for choices, for it recognizes that no single choice is so important that one's worth or identity rests on it alone. A ready heart does not need to be stubborn or to turn another off or reject an idea out of hand. The ready heart is wise enough to avoid situations that shatter unity or lead to disharmony. Limitations or weaknesses are expected and accepted by the heart made ready/steady by the Holy Spirit. The steady heart endures all things as it seeks for harmony and unity in interactions with others. The ready heart moves towards reconciliation and freedom. The other driver claims the parking space? Yes, let there be harmony. There will be another space. There is nothing really boring in such seemingly casual exchanges. There is an ever present challenge to foster strength in unity and vitality in the harmony of shared experiences, even that of parking space!

The ready heart unfolds to become an open heart, one willing to find God in every human experience: the insignificant, the distasteful, the delightful, the serious.

*An open heart* is one convinced of the reality of the incarnation. A heart humbled by the Spirit disdains nothing but is willing to have and to hold until the warmth of the divine hidden in the human moment pervades and enlightens. The open heart can acknowledge its own slavery because it has great confidence in God's freeing power. Daily routines are truly opportunities to find the Word made flesh.

Over time this learning by heart means making decisions with less dithering, delaying, brashness, carelessness, stubbornness. Patterns for making good choices gradually develop. Skills honed by daily living can be depended upon. For every person, however, good daily choosing is not without a price: self-knowledge, truth/reality-testing, mental discipline, cultivation of imagination, personal responsibility.

All this may well be so. But we honestly know how capable we are of making poor choices; choices that devolve into narrowness of mind and heart. We have all found ourselves devaluing life, self, work and others. Herein lies the rub. If we make foolish choices in the seemingly inconsequential matters of daily living, what is to become of us in serious situations?

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Ungodly choices, bad choices, non-choices in daily life are not ephemeral. They are real. They emerge from feelings of insecurity and are encumbered with concern for status or importance, with self-absorption, with cravings for power and control. Good habits of the heart can be easily diminished or forgotten when the desire to control a person or a situation overtakes the consciousness. Unity and harmony seem unreal in a heart focused on self-aggrandizement. Hard-won humility and wisdom fade quickly outside a life of prayer and faith. We find then that we have a need for a *friendly heart*, one capable of welcoming intimacy and trust in friends who will challenge us about petty selfishness, reassure us of goodness (God's and our own) and call us back to the high adventure of responsible daily choosing.

Truly, no one of us is faced with earth shattering alternatives constantly. Thankfully major decisions are not a matter of daily occurrence. But practice has great benefits that accrue and can be used in times of significant choice. Day by day we learn to make distinctions; to let go of silly expectations; to face the gambles. We know when to garner more or newer information. We accept the thousand no's for the joy of moving towards the great yes.

## Discernment as a Tug of War

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Chika Eze SHCJ

**I**T MAY SEEM odd to look at discernment as a tug of war, but a moment's reflection obliges us to recognise that the experience of discernment has sometimes been rather like an interior tug of war within ourselves — a tug of war between the opposing forces in the decision we are involved in making. Discernment involves listening so that we can identify the choices, alternatives and consequences, each of which must be analyzed and evaluated. Obviously anyone who involves her/himself in such a process will feel the pressure of being pulled in opposite directions — or even in parallel directions — and will be involved in the exercise of letting go.

Everyone who is engaged in decision making, even in ordinary daily decisions, will agree that it is always a struggle: a struggle of so many variations — a struggle which can leave us feeling joyfully fulfilled, contentedly happy, joyfully empty, restless, or depressed. If our response is to the God-side of the pulling we will often feel happy and content in spite of the struggle, because discernment leads us to be in union with God. Sometimes, though, the struggle will be to accept just that which we do not want — so it is not far removed from a tug of war.

In Ghana recently there was a highly-publicised incident in which a young man murdered two women in front of a number of witnesses. [British readers may think of the appalling incident at Dunblane. *Ed.*] What was happening in terms of the young man's interior tug of war? A struggle must have been going on for him in that most private interior space which we each uniquely claim as our own and are reluctant to share with anyone. In this case, the eye witnesses reported that the young man was clearly restless, moving up and down, sitting, kneeling, bending over, leaning on trees, staring into space. He was apparently engaged in some process of choosing, a process in which the negative choice overcame the positive.

If the young man had been involved in a serious discernment process according to St Ignatius' Rules he would have been encouraged to reveal what he was keeping secret in the depths of his heart. St Ignatius writes: