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Discerning Ministerial Transitions: An Experience of the Paschal Mystery

Discerning a ministerial transition—whether to remain in or to leave a certain ministry—is one of the most common emotional and spiritual challenges a minister faces in his or her career. Such events can be opportunities to grow in faith and a commitment to discipleship. They can also be invitations to a deeper participation in the paschal mystery. In today's Church, professional lay ministers face special challenges as they discern and implement ministerial transitions.

LAY MINISTERS IN TRANSITION

Susan, who had ministered as a D.R.E. in her home parish for several years, began to sense that God was urging her to tackle the formal study of theology. She decided to begin graduate school to work on a master of divinity and prepare for an entirely new ministry.

Lu had to reconsider her comfortable self-image as a youth minister after her mentor-pastor became ill and had to retire. When the new pastor arrived, she began to work through her grief. Reluctantly at first, she continued her ministry at the parish, but gradually found that her self-identity as a lay minister actually expanded.

Tom was taken by surprise at the news that his position as pastoral associate would no longer be continued upon the assignment of a new pastor in the next fiscal year. He found himself on an unexpected job-hunt while dealing with grief and a sense of rejection by the Church as he relinquished a ministry he loved.

When Angela's husband was transferred, she had to face immediate resignation from her position as music minister in a large suburban parish. She had no doubts that God wanted her to relinquish her ministry.

Despite many tensions and her frequent sense of frustration with the complicated bureaucracy, Marilyn recently agreed to continue her diocesan administrative position for at least another year because she wanted to complete the projects she had begun. When she prayed about her decision, she had a strong sense that God would provide her with the strength to find life and joy in her work.

John, a campus minister, encountered serious staff conflicts due to the drinking problem of one of his colleagues. This situation caused him great anxiety and often undermined his own projects and the effective ministry of the whole staff. He soon realized that his energies were depleted. He was burned out. He finally decided to take the tremendous risk of leaving this ministry without any job security. It took him some time to recover from this difficult transition.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DISCERNMENT IN TRANSITIONS

Transitions such as these are the stuff of ministry. For committed Christians, discernment should be a vital part of each and every transition whether it is a self-initiated decision to move on to a new position, an imposed termination, down-sizing, institutional closure, staff problem, other difficult circumstance, or an on-site adjustment to staff changes. Transitions can cause much emotional stress and demand much energy, time and attention. They impact our lives in both obvious and subtle ways. We grieve when we say good-bye, but saying hello also involves unforeseen adjustments. Even when a transition is clearly to our benefit, the personal adaptations can be enormously difficult.

Because transitions tend to bring to the surface a wide variety of emotions, they also bring new challenges to our self-understanding as disciples and our self-identity as ministers. However long-awaited or surprising a transition may be, however life-giving or paralyzing its effects, whether a change in ministry is eagerly embraced or stubbornly resisted, whether it is a moment for great self-discovery or destructive cynicism with the "system," we cannot grow spiritually through a transition without ongoing careful and prayerful discernment. Discernment empowers us to embrace everything involved in a transition, such as a radical change in ministry, minor adjustments in our responsibilities, or various degrees of refocusing our commitments.

We never discern in theoretical circumstances but only in real-life situations. The concrete questions often come down to these: "Should I stay or should I leave? If I stay or if I leave, why and how should I do so?" But during the discernment process the more fundamental and, finally, decisive questions are: "What may God be doing in my life? What may God be communicating to me about my life and my relationship with God and others? Where may God be leading me at this time through these circumstances?" Through discernment we come to sharper clarity about where and how God is inviting us to move forward. Only then can we discover what we should actually *do*.

In this way, discernment provides us with a rich process through which we can rediscover and redefine our vocation in ministry and, even more importantly, renew our encounter with God and restore our commitment to following Jesus. Discernment enables us to approach

not only our ministry but our whole life as a Christian disciple with greater intentionality and authenticity (Boroughs: 386). Discernment—before, during, and after each and every transition—becomes the instrument through which a life-transition can become a profound occasion for spiritual growth as we respond more fully to God’s grace in our lives.

In discussing discernment experiences with Susan, Lu, Tom, Angela, Marilyn, and John, I have noticed several recurring themes which correlate quite effectively with the guidelines for discernment taught and practiced by Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), the founder of the Society of Jesus. Interestingly enough, I have discovered that lay ministers who have shared their stories with me are generally unfamiliar with the specific concepts of Ignatian discernment. Still, many have actually stumbled across this method without realizing the historical origin of its principles. This seeming “natural propensity” towards Ignatian discernment has been a fascinating discovery for me. Simply put, Ignatius discovered a method, first for himself and then for his friends and followers, which guides participants in a process of faith. Ignatian discernment involves a complex of activities: questioning, seeking, understanding, imagining, deliberating, experimenting, sorting, weighing evidence, judging, deciding, and acting. Ignatian discernment uses our personal experience as the starting point and brings together our head and our heart in a delicate but dynamic balance. In this article I will highlight a number of areas in the transition-experiences of these lay ministers where Ignatian principles can best be illustrated.

THE QUESTION OF GOD’S WILL

How we deal with the question “What is God’s will for me?” always involves our personal image of God. Do we expect God’s will to be delivered when the buzzer rings, as though discernment were a kind of quiz show in which we are the contestants and God has all the miraculous answers to a series of true-false and multiple-choice questions? Or do we think of God as an architect with a vast and hidden blueprint for which we must search until the moment when God’s will magically appears and we know exactly what to do? Or do we consider God as a mastermind expecting our passive submission so that we can earn some grand heavenly reward if we but submit to this amorphous, yet powerful framework planned eons ago? Each of these images of God’s will would lead to a misconstrued discernment process.

In fact, discernment cannot begin unless we are ready to experience God as the One whose very being is eternal Self-Gift, the One who loves us personally and unconditionally, the One who calls us to life in every moment of every day and who invites us to collaborate actively in creating our future. In Ignatian discernment, the first step is accept-

ing the idea that God's will means that God wants to love us and to be loved in return. God wills for us to choose freely all that leads to the fullest possible human life. God especially wants for us to appropriate more consciously our own unique history of faith, to find its fullest meaning, so that we may enter more fully the covenant of love God desires to make with each of us (English: 11).

In a nutshell, God wills for each of us to be the most authentic person we can be. Sometimes this truth seems almost too basic. After all, we even teach it to little children from the onset of all our catechetical programs, but as adults we often have difficulty remembering—and possibly even believing—this elementary truth. Thus, discernment begins with remembering anew the lessons we learned as a little child. The circumstances of our lives may be very different, but God wills for each of us to enter into an ever-growing love relationship with our Creator and Redeemer.

OUR JOURNEY TOWARD WHOLENESS, FREEDOM, AND AUTHENTICITY

How is discernment part of the process of human maturation? First, we must recognize that psychological and spiritual growth go hand-in-hand. The Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan has proposed a way of describing human growth which correlates the two. He describes our fundamental human life-project in terms of our gradual existential self-realization as free and responsible subjects. In other words, as human beings (subjects), we are capable of freely choosing our path and taking responsibility for our choices. Lonergan called this the "ever-advancing thrust towards authenticity" by which we "move to the existential moment when we discover for ourselves that our choosing affects ourselves" (Lonergan: 240).

Building on Lonergan's basic ideas, Walter Conn has developed a comprehensive analysis of human development as conversion. In Conn's view, each progressive stage of human development requires some form of intellectual, affective, moral, spiritual and/or religious self-transcendence, which he simply defines as "the radical drive, the dynamic exigence of the human spirit for meaning, truth, value and love" (Conn: 24). Thus, at each stage of development, from infancy through childhood through adolescence through the entirety of adulthood until death itself, the human person grows in the capacity to transcend the former self and become a more authentic self.

For Conn, the most important form of self-transcendence is the capacity to love. The greatest conversion is when we decide to offer our very lives to others in some form of generous and creative compassion, care, and service. Because self-transcendence always propels us into a new way of being, it is not surprising to conclude that we are our most

“authentic selves” when we are truly free to love in committed and mutually self-giving relationships. Conn notes: “People fail to perceive the paradoxical truth that authentic realization of their deepest human desires occurs only when they turn their primary attention from their own interests and desires and genuinely involve themselves in the needs and desires of others” (Conn: 20).

ATTRACTION AND RESISTANCE

We are naturally inclined to this process of self-transcendence and conversion. The human person has an attraction to progression rather than regression. But in every psychological and spiritual transition, we also experience a strong tendency to resist leaving behind what has become a comfortable way of being. At first, the challenge of self-transcendence threatens us and we fear the transition to a new self-awareness or lifestyle. We might react to this challenge with outright rejection until we develop the confidence and are secure enough to make this transition. Surrender to the new may even feel like a death. Indeed, in a very real way, such a transition is a death to the former self. We certainly will never be the same again. Yet at the same time and paradoxically, surrender to change, to growth, to love, to generous service becomes the only path to greater freedom and self-fulfillment. When we recognize this, we are able to move beyond whatever form of entrapment or complacency we have known before and take on the next challenge. We put aside the former self and become a new self.

The opportunities for transition in our ministerial careers should always be discerned in the larger context of all the various transitions we experience as part of the normal maturation process. Our lives cannot be compartmentalized. We always discern as a whole person on an interior journey towards ever-advancing authenticity, freedom and self-transcendence—and thus, towards God and God’s passionate desire for us. Ignatius captured this insight as he declared himself a “pilgrim” in his autobiography (*Acta Patris Ignatii*). The concept of lifelong conversion is as fundamental to Ignatian discernment as it is to the entirety of the Christian spiritual tradition itself. Ignatius never considered his own spiritual pilgrimage complete. So, too, as we discern the various transitions in our lives, including those in our ministerial careers, we also must see ourselves as pilgrims on a journey.

With this larger perspective in mind, then, the key questions to ask ourselves should be: “What is God offering me in this transitional experience? What advances my authenticity as a person in a growing relationship with God? What am I attracted to doing and what am I resisting—and why? To what am I too attached? From what do I need to free myself so as to discover where God is inviting me to go so that I will grow into a fuller and freer person?”

Susan asked these very questions when she felt frustrated with the repetitiveness of her ministry. In secular terms, we might just say that she was bored and had “reached her peak.” She certainly yearned to move on to intellectual and spiritual growth. At the same time, she was trapped in the comfort zone of her successful ministry. On the one hand, she truly feared the risk of losing her job security, but on the other hand, she knew down deep that she was stagnating. Her self-gift to the parishioners was no longer an authentic expression of her identity.

Lu and Tom both experienced tremendous disappointment and loss in ministry. For a time, they both wanted to retreat within themselves to a safer place where they could avoid giving of themselves. Their gut reactions were to “lick their wounds.” They wanted to return to the safety of the past. Their attachment was a form of self-protection and even a bit of wallowing in self-pity. But they also sensed an urgency to move on, to let go and to trust the future.

Lu was strongly attracted to the more life-giving idea of sharing herself and her gifts in youth ministry even though she still grieved the loss of her beloved mentor.

Tom eventually stopped clinging to the sense of rejection he justifiably felt because he realized that refusing to let go was holding him back from creating a good future.

DISCERNMENT OF INTERIOR MOVEMENTS

A key factor in the discernment process is the identification of the frequently simultaneous interior movements of attraction and resistance to growth, which Ignatius described as *consolation* and *desolation*. Generally speaking, we will experience consolation as a deep sense of peace and integration, whereas in desolation we will experience interior disturbance. However, we must always look at the outcome or *terminus* of these interior movements, in other words our actual attitudes and behavior, to determine the real source of consolation and desolation (Buckley, 1991, 229). These movements are more than mere emotions, for they are rooted within the very core and sanctuary of our being (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, #16). One of the greatest Ignatian insights is that God communicates with us through every part of our complicated psyches—our intelligence, emotions, reason, reactions, urges, dreams, hopes, disappointments. In all this, God always urges us towards greater freedom and authenticity.

According to the Ignatian scholar Michael Buckley, the sign of true consolation from God is that it generates not only inner peace, but also a demonstrated increase in authentic freedom which he defines as the “potentiality for self-determination” (Buckley, 1984: 69). Buckley cautions

that self-determination is not mere liberty, but rather a self-transcending “interpersonal liberality” which manifests itself as “generous magnanimity” in our relationships. Most especially, it shows itself through loving, unselfish, and unconditional service of God’s people. What this means is precisely that all ministry is motivated by the profoundly experienced consolation of God’s love and a response of gratitude through service. This, of course, is the model Jesus gave us. Ministry is first and foremost self-transcendence. For Buckley, then, the most important questions in evaluating the source of interior movements, especially of consolation, would be: “What are you going to do with your freedom? What are you going to do with yourself?” (Buckley, 1984: 71)

Marilyn was at first attracted to running away from her responsibilities just for sheer relief. Yet she felt dissatisfied and sad when she considered this. Gradually, she was forcefully drawn to the deep-seated awareness of God’s personal love for her. She became more conscious of how much Jesus had done for her, especially through his passion and death. Could she, without resentment, put aside some of her immediate needs for the long-term needs of the diocese? She realized her unique qualifications for her ministry and decided to continue in her present capacity while she discerned options for the future. In this way, she was able to commit herself generously to an act of self-transcendence without forsaking her own spiritual journey. In fact, she experienced consolation even more powerfully as a result.

We can readily identify how Marilyn sorted through the interior movements of consolation and desolation in her discernment process by the visible outcome in both her attitudes and actions. Let us look more closely at the interior movements of consolation and desolation.

THE INTERIOR MOVEMENT OF CONSOLATION

David Fleming, S.J., describes consolation as a “deep down peace” (Fleming: 316). Maureen Conroy, R.S.M., further suggests that in consolation, we experience a sense of being “congruent with God” (Conroy: 19). True consolation always originates in God’s active movement towards our hearts. Consolation puts everything in proper perspective, even the most conflicting and discomfiting circumstances which encompass the life-event of transition. Consolation most often happens gradually, but it can occur suddenly with great clarity, especially if we have been concentrating on our relationship with God through regular prayer and sincere attempts to listen to God’s movements.

Angela experienced immediate consolation and a deep connection with God when her spouse unexpectedly informed her of his new

position. Because she had been praying about her spouse's employment and her own future in ministry, she was quite in touch with her genuine desire to entrust herself to God's unfailing love and protection. She was not afraid of the transfer, even though it meant relinquishing her current position and putting her own ministerial goals on temporary hold. She was able to assent confidently to this job-transfer.

One clear indication of consolation is the energy which flows from such spiritual integration. We may find ourselves remarkably capable of transcending pettiness and drudgery to serve joyfully, as Marilyn and as Angela did. Both of these women experienced what John English, S.J., calls a "holy *anamnesis*," or "felt trail of consolation" in our own unique spiritual history (English: 11). Such *anamnesis* helps us recall our original awakening to God's unconditional love, our call to discipleship, our desire to enter into ministry in the first place.

When Tom was terminated, anger and hurt dominated his spiritual landscape for months. But as he slowly unraveled his feelings in prayer, he recognized that his termination was the result of human decisions, albeit unjustified ones. He remembered his initial sense of vocation and how energized and hopeful he was at that time of his life. He recalled vividly God's healing love at other crises in his life, and he truly desired to trust God again in the same way. He realized that God's will was for him to survive and continue in ministry, and that God wanted his healing to begin.

We see in Tom's story the element of *self-transcendence* which is initiated and supported through genuine consolation even when we have experienced injustice, betrayal or failure in ministry. Consolation helps us ask these questions during a painful transition: "How could I become a better minister because of this experience? How might I support others who have experienced injustice in ministry? How will I reach out and move beyond this hurt, pain, and humiliation?" Such consolation is, once again, described beautifully by David Fleming: "My consolation: who I am by the grace of God" (Fleming: 234). When we come to understand yet again who we are by the grace of God, we can be sure that we are again embarking on another part of our journey towards authenticity.

THE INTERIOR MOVEMENT OF DESOLATION

Desolation is often rooted in our sinfulness, in self-centeredness, or in deeply unfree areas (Conroy: 23). People often describe desolation as a spiritual feeling of entrapment in a heavy darkness of spirit, as paralysis, fear, alienation, emptiness, dryness, rebelliousness, restlessness, frag-

mentation, brokenness, disintegration, perhaps even despair. There is often a marked distaste for prayer. Symptoms may include a lack of energy and enthusiasm, sometimes even developing into apathy. We feel a desperate desire to reverse our current forward-moving behavior patterns, to give up, run away, escape from responsibilities and relationships. We might feel isolated and alone, as though God has abandoned us, as though “we are living a skeletal life of the bare bones of faith” (Fleming: 320). Many ministers have described desolation as almost like spiritual burnout, and indeed, sometimes it is hard to distinguish whether burnout is the cause or the result of spiritual desolation. Whatever the source, the inner turmoil of desolation clearly has the power to prevent self-transcendence and healthy ministry.

John’s desolation began to de-energize him as the dysfunction in his ministerial employment dominated his life. His original sense of joy in ministry disappeared. He became angry and cynical as exhaustion engulfed him. He realized that his ministry had become mechanical. As the crisis mounted, he felt increasingly isolated from his colleagues who did not want to address the problem. John began to distance himself first from liturgy, then even from personal prayer. Finally, John faced his desolation squarely. He began to seek help. He saw that he had been relying only on himself and had been resistant to liberate himself from this addictive atmosphere. His own desolation had nearly sabotaged his ministry.

Ignatius described inner turmoil like John’s in combative terms, as a battle requiring all our spiritual energies. In desolation we seem to be immensely attracted, almost in an addictive way, to what moves us away from God and towards what Ignatius called *inordinate attachments*. These might be any person, desire, or habit which is an obstacle to the development of our relationship with God. Inordinate attachments are surprisingly deceptive. They provide a “false consolation” in that they initially feel so right and bring a shallow peace, but they eventually lead us to desolation because we cannot detach ourselves from them. Thus, we cling fiercely to these attachments, sometimes long after we have acknowledged to ourselves the harm they bring to our well-being.

In Ignatius’ mind, it is the Evil One who tempts us to abandon God’s love for us in favor of harmful attachments or yearnings. Whether we attribute this struggle to the Evil One, to our own complex tendency towards self-deception and self-destruction, or to the normal attraction and resistance in the process of maturation, we must still remember that God never inflicts desolation as a test of loyalty, as though God’s will and my will are adversaries. Quite the contrary: God’s fundamental desire for each person is freedom, grace, life and authenticity. God

always wants to draw each of us out of desolation, but we must accept this invitation freely.

John discovered that his *inordinate attachment* was his own ministerial self-image as hero! The more he quixotically attempted to play the role of savior/martyr, the more chaotic his interior movements became. He could no longer concentrate on his ministry, only on his misery. His false bravado led to a joyless period, which only ended when he finally admitted to himself that he was not the Messiah.

The source of Lu's desolation was her immature dependence on her mentor. She missed his companionship, advice, and his daily interest in her ministry. She discerned that her fear at the very thought of ministering without his presence was an obstacle to her personal growth. In time, she came to trust that her mentor's departure was an invitation from God for her to grow into a more mature and independent self-image. Soon she was able to find new energy in her ministry. Another surprise followed: her relationship with her mentor actually moved to a new level of collegiality in ministry.

Overcoming desolation first requires the recognition that we are indeed experiencing a movement drawing us further from God. In desolation we need time, patience, honesty with ourselves and a trusted spiritual advisor to walk with us through its many complexities. Ignatius's basic advice about desolation still holds true today. During desolation we should not change our current course of action until we have taken time for adequate prayer and discernment. We should honestly confront our own stubbornness, immaturity, attachments, pride and sinfulness. We need to ask for God's help.

In desolation we should put extra effort into remembering our experience of past consolations which will help nourish our trust and hope in God's abundant healing love for us. Above all else, we should never keep desolation bottled up inside ourselves. We should acknowledge it openly to dispel its power and control, as John and Lu did. We can be sure that God will always show us a way through the darkness of desolation, because God has invited us into relationship in the first place.

DISCERNMENT: FOLLOWING JESUS THROUGH THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

In a very real way, discernment through desolation can be a graced opportunity to enter into the dying and rising of Jesus. Jesus discerned and embraced God's will through many transitions in his life, but his most self-transcendent action was his embrace of his own impending death during his agony at Gethsemani. Here we see Jesus struggling

between intense desolation, even sweating drops of blood, yet surrendering with stunning freedom and faith in Abba. Jesus remembered, in "holy *anamnesis*," his union with Abba. His sublime moment of existential self-realization and authenticity brought him immense consolation in the midst of desolation. He did not turn back to the past and to security but embraced his suffering and death. Thus, Jesus' death by crucifixion became the self-transcendent act of God's glory and his cross became the contradictory sign of victory, new life and liberation for all time. The paschal mystery is at the heart of our Christian faith.

Because dying and rising is what transition is all about, Jesus himself is the best model of discernment. Each and every transition on our journey to authenticity has the potential to reveal the paschal mystery to us in our own here and now. Each ministerial transition is God's invitation to die and rise, whether in small or profound ways. Discernment helps us accept the grace to participate freely and willingly in the paschal mystery.

"This feels like I'm dying in a way," Angela declared at one point. "Yes, part of me is dying. But somehow I've never felt so alive before! I know God will bring me life."

In our own way, each of us says these words as we strive to embrace the paschal mystery in our own transitions. The real question of each discernment is: "Am I willing to accept God's invitation to share in Christ's death and resurrection?"

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True collaboration requires an appreciation of the distinction and differentiation of roles and responsibilities in the body of Christ, together with a clear recognition of the fundamental equality of all the baptized, ordained and nonordained. For effective collaboration to occur, each one must believe that he or she has something to offer and have trust in the gifts that others bring to our common task. Above all, we must be willing to admit that we can achieve something together that we cannot achieve alone.

—Roger Cardinal Mahony
"As I Have Done for You"
a pastoral letter on ministry