

Ignatius, the Wiseman: Reflection #3

An ongoing series exploring how Ignatius the Pilgrim discerned the spirits in his quest for Christ.

Seeing Stars

... "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage." (Matthew 2:2)

Like the Wisemen, Ignatius trusted not only that Christ can be found but that Christ communicates as to how to find him. But how exactly did God use a star to lead the Magi? Did God create a new star from nothing? Or did something else happen? And how did Ignatius discern God's will through exterior signs?

I personally believe that most of the signs that we get from God are not "sent" from God in that moment. Rather, God uses what is already there—the "stuff" (stars, flowers, etc.) and events (dreams, pandemics, etc.) of our lives to let us know his will. It's perfectly OK for us to pray, "God send me a sign," but it is even more helpful to pray, "God send me sight." All of the signs that we need to follow God's will are already embedded in our lives. The problem is not that we are lacking signs but rather that we are lacking sight. We are lacking the vision to recognize God's messages to us that are already existing in our lives. The Wise Magi are called wise because they looked at exactly the same sky as everyone else and yet they saw—written in the stars—the path to Christ.

This is where prayer enters in. We pray, not in order to get God to send us a sign but rather to have God transform our perception of reality. In prayer we become attuned to God's action that is already happening around us. Saint Ignatius says,

...God works and labors for me in all creatures upon the face of the earth, that is, He conducts Himself as one who labors. Thus, in the heavens, the elements, the plants, the fruits, the cattle, etc.,

God labors through the elements of the earth and through the events of our own lives to communicate His will. I am amused by the fact that Ignatius used cattle as one of his examples. Imagine I am walking through a pasture and asking God for a sign in regards to an important decision that I have to make. Just as I am making this request to God, a cow nearby bellows out a loud *Moo*. I would not believe that God had momentarily possessed the poor cow and forced her to speak to me. But I would believe that God might be using the cow ("laboring through the cow" Ignatius would say)

to say something to me. The cow's *moo* is her own, but God might use it as a vehicle—a carrier—of His word. How would I know? How can I be sure it isn't simply my imagination? I will have to pray some more about it. I will ask God to help me sort through it all. There are no shortcuts on the Wiseman's journey. And this is why the distinction between God sending signs and God using signs that are already there is an important one. Many a Christian have made mistakes because they wrongly assumed that God had sent a sign through one particular experience. Our chances of discerning well improve considerably if we not put too much weight on one occurrence but rather that we slowly and thoroughly pray through all of the happenings of our lives, not looking for a shortcut but taking the long slow journey of the Wise, following a star but also asking questions along the way, "Where is the newborn king?" (Matthew 2:2)

Questions to ponder

1. What is the thing I need to discern in my life right now? What's the important decision that I need to make?
2. If Ignatius is correct and God is communicating to me through ordinary things and events, then what might the "stars" and the "cattle" be telling me about my current discernment?
3. Speak with God about this. Use your imagination in prayer to imagine what God might be trying to tell you about your discernment.

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