Reflections for our Discerners at the DeSales University’s Center for Discernment
by Dr. Stephen Loughlin

01.02.09: The Choice Between Two Goods

Among the decisions that we make on a daily basis, the most difficult of choices, to my mind, are those that involve two seemingly equal goods. Should I marry this man, or become a sister? Should I pursue a relation with this good Catholic woman, or enter a monastery? Should I accept a job at a better university, or recommit my energies to DeSales? Should I continue my training to become a Physician’s Assistant or a doctor, or abandon those studies and take up a degree in philosophy and/or theology? Should I aspire to work for a famous law firm where I would be assured of great pay, reputation, and a comfortable life, or seek out a less prestigious, less remunerative firm involved heavily with social issues and pro bono work? These are but a few of the dilemmas that I have heard in my role as counsellor over the past ten years. Although they differ widely in content, the concern in each is always the same, namely, how do I discern which of the two is the more appropriate choice, the better use of my talents, the best way to determine my life?

It is difficult to advise people in such matters. At the very least, it is good to begin with the recognition that there are a few paths that should be avoided in addressing these dilemmas. Besides the simplistic resolution effected by abandoning the hard work of mature discernment through picking lightly and capriciously one or the other option (trusting that since both are good, it does not matter which one I chose), there is the temptation to reinterpret one of the choices as an evil through some process of self-delusion. To use the examples I offered above, this might involve seeing DeSales as bad in some way so that the choice of the other institution becomes all the easier to make since it is now “far better” and more attractive. Again, in choosing between marriage with this good Catholic woman or entering a monastery, our fellow might be convinced that the monastery is somehow defective or unnatural, a “fact” that would be made all the more powerful in light of the goodness of the woman before him. Or perhaps the woman might be seen for what she “truly is,” making the goodness of the monastery shine forth all the more. One can see that these approaches do not honestly regard, respect or reverence the truth and goodness of the things or people they address. This strategy not only excuses one from the personal, communal and spiritual work required of the mature Christian,¹ but also from having to embrace fully the consequences of whatever choice is made. For when one acts in this way, one acts accidentally, as it were, having been led by lies, deceits, fears, and desires, which rob one’s choice of the fullness of the humanity one should have brought to bear upon the situation in the first place. One neither encompasses or appreciates the good chosen, let alone the good denied — one’s sight is clouded with respect to the true goods (and evils) to be found in both choices, a sight that is not simply gifted to one, but which demands hard work on one’s part to acquire.

Another common temptation is to look to our pleasure as a guide in the resolution of these dilemmas. Now most people understand correctly that pleasure is not necessarily a sign of a well-ordered moral activity. Most also recognize that pleasure is an insufficient basis upon which to build the whole of one’s moral views. Nevertheless, many consider the best or even the most authentic way to proceed when confronted with two

¹ A manifestation of the sloth I spoke of in the reflection dated 10.17.08: “The Intellectual Pillar and the Search for Wisdom.”
seemingly equal goods to be determined by the degree of pleasure, comfort, good-feeling or peace they feel in the face of one of the goods as opposed to the other. The presumption here is that their pleasures are rightly ordered and experienced, and that the good feeling they have is to be trusted (usually because their intentions are good, that they have not acted badly in the past, are honestly trying to discern the right way to proceed, are committed beautifully and powerfully to the things of God, have the love of Jesus in their hearts, and so on). The problem though is that the effecting of a right ordering of one’s pleasure so that it might indeed become a powerful guide to the choice of what is best or most authentic is a difficult thing experienced only by those who have progressed far in the acquisition of the cardinal, intellectual and theological virtues. Such a person, according to Aristotle, experiences no discord between what he knows to be good and his desires with respect to it; what he knows to be true is identical to the good he desires. Most people, however, have not attained this excellence of character and unity of person. They continue to experience that discord between their knowledge and desires, with the result that their pleasure does not act as a sure and effective guide in their deliberations and actions. Again, such people act accidentally. They can easily mistaken, for example, the more authentic prayer form to be that one which is more “Spirit-filled” (that is to say, more exciting, exhilarating, impassioned, and so on), the better teacher to be the one who is more entertaining, personable, and humorous, the holier eucharistic celebration to be the one filled with popular music, a charismatic priest and an involved congregation, and the better politician to be the one who more effectively titillates them with promises of hope and change. In each case, the decision is based not on the merits of the situation, nor upon the prayer they have made or the involvement of the community to which they belong. Instead, it throws the decision upon the shoulders of whatever they happen to find pleasing at that time of their life.

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2 One can also see how one, having reached this point, can then support one’s decision by appealing to the prior move (of regarding the less “authentic” form of prayer, teaching, eucharist, and politician now for “what they really are”).

3 One could restate this second temptation in a number of ways, all of which are connected with what is pleasing to the one who chooses. Thus, one might center primarily upon which of the two choices will be easier to handle, or which of the two promises greater or more immediate returns. One might shudder at the responsibilities that both choices entail and choose the lesser of the two. One might be wary of where each choice will lead and thus err on the side of caution. However one formulates one’s evasion, one inevitably makes the mistake noted by Socrates in Plato’s *Euthyphro*, namely that one’s understanding of something is not achieved through what one does to or feels about the thing to be understood, and that if one proceeds in this fashion, one will damage both the morality of the choice to be made, and one’s character. Thus a carpenter’s work is not understood as good just because he happens to be happy with the product of his work. One would hope that his happiness would be consequent upon something objectively good in the work itself. And if you consider such a judgment impossible to make, given the supposed relativity of all judgements of what is “good,” ask yourself whether you would pay such a fellow his wage simply because he happens to define his work as good according to his own pleasure? I know I wouldn’t pay such a fellow, and not because I was not pleased with his work, but rather that he had not built in conformity with the art of carpentry, had not acted out of the fullness of his discipline, had not instilled in his work the minimum of what defines carpentry itself. My pleasure (or lack thereof), then, is a consequence of my knowledge and judgment, and is a sign of the state of my mind and character. It is an opportunity both for myself and others to investigate its causes and is not to be regarded as definitive of any moral category, let alone the essence of something.
To my mind, the way to proceed does not consist in taking “the road less travelled,” as that most disagreeable of little sermons recommends. It is something exhibited best in the lives of those who have navigated these waters successfully and maturely. The most beautiful and recent example that comes to my mind is the decision made by two women whether to continue in their training to become medical professionals, or to abandon this for their new found love of philosophy/theology. One chose to remain in her field, the other chose to pursue philosophy/theology. Both seem to have made the right decision. The first agonized over her choice, seeing the good in both fields, but finally, after much counselling from many people from many different fields, ages, and levels of maturity, decided upon the good of her originally intended profession and all that it promised (marriage, children, the chance to donate the entirety of her person according to the fullness of the training she had received, the full and immediate manifestation of her character on behalf of the poor, the infirm, and the aged, to name but a few). Her regrets were many, particularly in light of the fact that in philosophy she had found a discipline that not only inflamed her heart and mind, but had given her a language and a conceptual field that would aid her, if pursued further and professionally, to express in word and argument all that she knew to be true that had been gifted to her through her faith. The process she went through was, as I said, agonizing, culminating in tears at a philosophy and theology discussion group when she realized, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that to engage fully and properly in the conversation at hand would require that she travel a road that she knew she would not travel. Since that time, she has flourished in her chosen field, has maintained that beauty and innocence that only a true child of God has, and treasures deeply the experience she had with a field that she will never pursue, thus profoundly and beautifully respecting it for all that it is. Rarely have I seen such a mature decision and consequent bearing in so young a person. Then there is the example of the other who abandoned her aspirations to the medical field and chose to pursue the life of philosophy/theology instead. Again, the agony experienced over this decision was deep and profound, particularly in light of the fact that her mind, having been immersed in the things of science all her life, was now asked to plunge into waters unknown, using a method just recently discovered. I don’t think many people can appreciate how difficult a thing this is, that is, not just to awaken to the existence of methods other than the scientific, but to take these up in a serious fashion and to remold one’s approach to reality in light of them! Friends were lost, her family was greatly

4 Forgive me for my expression. For I do not wish to offend any who have enjoyed this kind of sermon or who have offered it successfully from the pulpit. My dislike for this sermon is a personal one that derives from the fact that I have heard it far too many times, and in all of its permutations, it has never risen above a platitudinous level. My main complaint with the sermons that I have heard on this theme is that they consider the suffering itself to be the litmus test for the correctness of the choice made. In response to such a view, I say that one should note carefully that although suffering is an important aspect of our lives as Christians (see the reflections dated 10.03.08: “Martha, Mary and the Life of Contemplation” and 10.24.08: “The Importance of Choosing One’s Burdens and Master Wisely”), it is not a sure sign that what one is doing is correct. For many have suffered things foolishly, needlessly and improperly. I cannot begin to relate the number of times I have heard the most liberal of people justify their positions by telling me of the persecution that they have suffered at the hands of conservatives and the self-righteous, thinking that such situations cast them immediately in the person of the holy martyrs and their persecutors in the person of the Pharisees.

5 One might want to consider not only the personal examples I am about to offer, but also the lives of the saints (see my reflection dated 09.19.08: The Human Pillar and the Heroes of Our Faith”).

6 For this posture, see the reflection dated 11.21.08: “The Human Pillar and the Character of a Child Before God.”
troubled, and the element of the unknown and the unforeseen were introduced into her life in a profound way.\textsuperscript{7} The process she followed was much the same as before: a careful examination of her heart, mind and person so as to discern how best to spend the talents of her life without regard for the allurements, advancements, and promises of this world. And this examination was not just personal but also public. For she sought out many and diverse counsellors, particularly those from whom she was sure that they would speak the truth and would not aid her in the self-delusion mentioned previously, a delusion to which we are all inclined due to our fallen nature.\textsuperscript{8} It is too early to tell what her regrets will be, for her discernment is still on-going and has still to reveal where it will complete (although I have a very good idea where it will end). But it can be said that she no longer experiences the taste she had before for the medical field, although her love of both the scientific and its practical benefit to mankind still resonates deep within her heart. There is no turning back for either of these women. Their decisions were made and their hands are now to the plough, the field is being tilled as we speak, and their lives blossom in a way that makes this surrogate father so very proud of them.

The difficulty in making such choices can extend far beyond the choice itself, as is the case with the second woman who chose philosophy/theology over the medical field. This is an important point to note: not every choice resolves so beautifully, immediately and completely as it did for the the first woman who chose the medical field over philosophy. Allow me to offer a personal example. Several years ago, during the time that my tenure application was being considered, I had decided to make application to several other institutions. The result of this was two offers of employment. The first was with a seminary in the Western United States, and the other was with the University of Prince Edward Island on the east coast of Canada. The latter of the two was far more promising, and I withdrew myself from the seminary’s consideration. I came finally to the choice between remaining at DeSales (at which point I was not sure whether tenure had been granted), or taking up a far better paying job with UPEI at half the teaching load. The discernment was difficult, and involved a great many people both here at DeSales and outside. In the end, the choice was made to remain, a choice that could not have been made had there not been this very public aspect of my discernment. I can say, however, with all certainty that there has been no pleasure, relief or peace in the choice that I made to remain at DeSales. For these were denied me given the fact that this particular discernment was of a kind that could be finished only after many years had passed, something that I am now beginning to realize. In this discernment, I was extended the invitation to go deep into my character to discover aspects that I had not known, and to revisit those that I do not and normally would not. In the acceptance of this invitation to consider myself anew, to gaze into my character in a brutally honest and insightful way, this choice became the opportunity for growth unplanned and frankly undesired. Almost four years after the event, I can say that I did make the right choice, but I have yet to experience the completion of it, particularly as I have grown into the man that I now find myself to be, a man that I had not suspected, but in which I rejoice now although quite cautiously.

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\textsuperscript{7} Something I have dwelt on in my last reflection dated 12.26.08: “Your Life is No Longer Your Own.”

\textsuperscript{8} I cannot stress enough the care with which we should choose our counsellors. For it is very common, whether consciously or unconsciously done, to seek those advisors who will tell us exactly what we want to hear, and thus who will aid us in our attempts at self-delusion. A variety of advisors and a lack of ready personal comfort with some of them will help one to avoid such situations.
As each of you well understand, the discernment of such dilemmas is in some ways an extremely personal affair. It is, of course, no easy thing to determine the course of your future, particularly where both choices promise so many ways of realizing your potential, but always at the expense of denying a whole host of other opportunities. For every choice has its consequences, and for everything that we gain, something is lost. Thus, prayer is essential to the resolution of our dilemmas. However, one must combine the personal with the public, as this is the only way that we can do justice to the issues that lie before us in the fullness of our humanity.9

Consider, then, the stories above, and those of your friends and family, and learn this social aspect of discernment. Seek out spiritual direction not only from those you trust and with whom you feel comfortable, but from those you know will speak the truths that you may not desire to hear. Be awake to and respectful of the beauty that is before you. Recognize the choices that are before you in the full light of day, and choose carefully and humanly in the determination of your life, honoring both the good that you eventually select and the one that you will deny, and this with the grace by which you hold and conduct yourself as a Christian, something gifted to you by your family, your tradition, your Church and by God Himself.

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9 Again look to the description I offered of our humanity in the reflection dated 10.24.08: “The Importance of Choosing One’s Burdens and Master Wisely.”