



## **“A Way to Discern God’s Will,” “Working with Others”**

*This blog post from Fr. William Barry, SJ, is a reflection on David Fleming’s Book, “What is Ignatian Spirituality”, which Ignatian Volunteers are using for spiritual reflection in many regions this service year.*

In “A Way to Discern God’s Will” Dave Fleming notes how surprising—and risky—it can seem to trust our feelings as Ignatius seems to want us to do in his rules for discernment and in his three ways of making a good choice. But we might keep in mind John Macmurray’s analysis of the modern situation which I mentioned in [the blog for February](#). There I wrote of his BBC lectures of 1930 and 1932 in which he spoke of how Westerners had allowed their minds to develop in freedom over the past few centuries, but had not had a comparable development of their hearts. I then went on to speak of how Ignatian discernment of spirits is one way to develop more mature hearts, hearts in tune with God’s dream for the world. In this blog I want to develop what Macmurray said to show first why trust in our hearts is risky and secondly how discernment can lessen the risk.

Macmurray noted, “Knowledge is power, but emotion is the master of our values and of the uses, therefore, to which we put our power.” In other words, what we desire, what is uppermost in our hearts, controls what we value and what we value controls how we use the power that our mind has put into our hands. For instance, modern science and technology have given us some control over atomic energy, which can be used in many ways. What was almost the first thing humans decided to do with that knowledge? To make bombs, to get the bomb before the “evil ones” do. You can think of any number of other instances of what modern intellectual development has put into our hands, and how our desires have led us to make use of these powers. Macmurray was on to something profound about our modern dilemma when he noted, “(e)motionally we are primitive, childish, undeveloped. Therefore, we have the tastes, the appetites, the interests and apprehensions of children. But we have in our hands a vast set of powers, which are the products of our intellectual development. We have used these powers to construct an intricate machinery of life, all in the service of our childish desires. And now we are waking up to the fact that we cannot control it, that we do not even know what we want to do with it. So we are beginning to be afraid of the work of our hands. That is the modern dilemma.” Remember that he gave those lectures in 1930 and 1932, before the rise of Nazism in Germany, before the Final Solution and the gas chambers, before Hiroshima and Nagasaki, etc.

So Fleming is correct in noting that Ignatian discernment is a risky business. As things stand, we cannot trust our hearts to move us in the right direction. However, what else do we have? Our intellect is not what moves us to choose; our hearts do. What Macmurray offered as a solution to the “modern dilemma” was the disciplined development of our feelings so that they become attuned with reality. As long as our hearts are primitive, they are not in tune with reality; they are

insane. Ignatian discernment of spirits is one way to discipline our hearts so that we become more adult in our desires and thus more in tune with reality, which is God's dream for our world. We can attune our hearts to God's ways and thus become images of God, human beings who are friends of God, of one another and of the rest of creation.

*Fr. Bill Barry, SJ is a Spiritual Reflector for IVC New England. He entered the Society of Jesus in 1950 and was ordained in 1962. He earned a Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the University of Michigan in 1968. He has taught at the University of Michigan, Weston Jesuit School of Theology, and Boston College. Bill is the author or co-author of 20 books, including *The Practice of Spiritual Direction, God and You, Finding God in All Things, Spiritual Direction and the Encounter with God, Who Do You Say I Am?, Contemplatives in Action, and A Friendship like No Other.* For more on his writing please visit [Loyola Press](#).*