Ignatian Discernment 101
SPIRITUAL INTELLIGENCE IS DISCERNMENT
by Karel S. San Juan, SJ, PhD

We have heard of the different “intelligences” or “quotients” which people can possess, the most popular of which are mental intelligence (IQ), emotional-social intelligence (EQ), and physical intelligence (PQ). Perhaps we have also heard of another one, spiritual intelligence (SQ), which the late leadership author Stephen Covey calls the “central and most fundamental of all the intelligences because it becomes the source of guidance of the others.” This is such a big statement coming from a thinker and expert who devoted his life to helping people achieve personal, interpersonal, and organizational excellence and effectiveness.

By spiritual intelligence, we may mean the capacity to feel and understand the spiritual in things, in people, in the world. But what is to be “spiritual”? Or what is “spirituality”? This is another big word, and some people may not be comfortable talking about it. Or many do not use the word, but in many ways, they mean or manifest it in certain dispositions and practices, such as the following:

- Seeing depth, wonder and meaning in events, in people, in things
- Connecting to a bigger whole or larger scheme of things
- Relating with a higher source of power, strength, wisdom, truth, goodness
- Being able to transcend or go beyond the realities of one’s existence

St. Ignatius of Loyola may have something to say about spiritual intelligence. His life journey was a fervent search for the spiritual, which is how to give greater glory to God. In the process he learned how to track and follow God, how to sift through interior movements of the spirits, how to keep God and remain with God throughout his life. Through the Spiritual Exercises Ignatius teaches us that to make a decision with God and for God is what discernment is all about. Furthermore, he teaches us the following points for discernment:

- Our purpose in life is to love, praise, and serve God; and that our vocation as Christians is to know, love, and follow Jesus more intimately;
- That we can strive to purify our intentions and motivations according to this purpose through a process of self-transcendence and transformation;
- That we can challenge ourselves to love more, be more, and do more – the magis – in the spirit of generosity;
- That in whatever choice we make in the spirit of discernment, we can be assured of God’s constant love, grace and accompaniment, and thus we need not be afraid.

Thus, for Ignatius, to be spiritually intelligent is to be discerning (and vice-versa). He says more about discernment when he writes about the imperative to know one’s self, one’s God, and one’s context more deeply. This is where complexity comes in. This will be the topic of Ignatian Discernment 102.

Karel S. San Juan, SJ is the Executive Director of Emmaus Center for Psycho-Spiritual Formation.
Discernment as a Disposition of Generosity
by Eva K. Galvey

Discernment is a word often heard today. Most commonly used in relation to decision-making, discernment is generally understood to be the process of arriving at the best option. In its usual sense, the best option refers to the choice that is most likely to ensure one’s happiness, fulfillment and success. This means being able to find the option where difficulties will be absent or at best minimal.

In the Christian sense, however, discernment is more than just a method of arriving at the best decision. Even the understanding of what is a “best decision” takes on a different layer of meaning. In the Ignatian sense, discernment is about generosity. It is about arriving at the choice where God can best be glorified, best be loved and served. Far from being about one’s self, one’s sense of happiness, fulfillment and success in Ignatian discernment is about promoting the kingdom of God. This is what David Fleming refers to when he paraphrases The First Principle and Foundation of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius:

“Our only desire and our choice should be this:
I want and choose what better leads
to God’s deepening his life in me.”

To arrive at this understanding of discernment as a disposition of generosity to God is a depth process, a spiritual journey. We need to experience God as not just real but personal, God truly present and acting in our life. God is recognized and experienced as deeply loving. When God’s love is felt as overwhelmingly constant, unconditional and inexhaustible, a profound sense of gratitude that translates to generosity is evoked in us. Now overflowing with gratitude, the heart seeks to return goodness for goodness. The love of God we allow ourselves to receive enlarges our heart, making us more and more capable of returning greater love. God’s magnanimity, experienced and acknowledged over and over again, gradually allows us to put God first in our life. Pleasing God becomes our priority. Our choices begin to consistently consider God’s wishes and God’s desires. Our heart then becomes oriented to God’s desires. God’s desires thus become our desires as well.

Eva K. Galvey is a founding associate and former director of Emmaus Center for Psycho-Spiritual Formation.