

## THE PRAYER OF ST IGNATIUS: HELP FOR THE SICK IN MAKING CHOICES

*One of our editorial team was seriously ill recently, and the need to accept both illness and uncertainty resonates strongly with this prayer of St Ignatius (Editor).*

***Take Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all that I have and possess. Thou hast given all to me. To Thee, O Lord, I return it. All is Thine, dispose of it wholly according to Thy will. Give me Thy love and thy grace, for this is sufficient for me.***

**St Ignatius Loyola**

Decision making is hard. We may live in a time and place that allows us much freedom and choice, but there are times when we think it's too much. Too many choices. Too much freedom. We might as well trudge down the road more travelled, might as well watch the same channel out of two hundred every night, might as well keep sending our kids to the same lousy school even though we know it's lousy, might as well keep going to the same dreadful job even though we suspect it just might be leaching our soul away, might as well just turn our backs from the choices in the baskets completely and start sifting the sawdust through our fingers again—that's a whole lot easier.

### WHAT DOES GOD WANT?

One reason it's difficult to make choices is that, although all of us have limitations of one sort or another, it's actually rather shocking how much freedom we really have. If I wanted to, I could do something that addresses my yearning to do something more concretely practical to help other people. I could announce that I'm going to nursing school, for example. Or I could give in to my lifelong fascination with infant linguistic development, and get into graduate school. I could do it. And maybe I will.

We can approach the question of decision making from a number of perspectives, but if we're Christians, and if we really believe that we are made by God and live in a world made by God and for God's purpose, our only reasonable starting place is that purpose: What does God want?

### THE KING OF DISCERNMENT

The Catholic spiritual tradition calls decision making "discernment." The word implies not coming up with a new idea completely out of our own creativity, but clarifying things so that we can see and understand something that's already in place: what God wants us to do.

St. Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits, is really the king of discernment in the Catholic tradition. His Spiritual Exercises, written over a couple of decades in the mid-sixteenth century and used by hundreds of thousands in the

centuries since, is essentially the structure of a personal retreat dedicated to discernment of God's will in one's life. This retreat can take as long as thirty days, and one of its last elements is this prayer:

*Take Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all that I have and possess. Thou hast given all to me. To Thee, O Lord, I return*

*it. All is Thine, dispose of it wholly according to Thy will. Give me Thy love and Thy grace, for this is sufficient for me.*



It's called the Suscipe, Latin for "take," and even if you haven't prayed it before it might be familiar to you from a contemporary hymn sung in Catholic churches called, not surprisingly, "Take Lord, Receive" and composed by, of course, a Jesuit.

### LOVING GOD

If we're wondering what to do with our lives, or even with the next fifteen minutes, the Suscipe is a wonderful prayer to fall back on. When it comes to decision making, context is everything, and this is a prayer that instantly puts our decision making into the right context, even when our own words fail us, when our own desires are pulling us in a million directions.

Although it doesn't use the word, the Suscipe is, in the end, about love. As Ignatius introduces the prayer in a section entitled "Contemplation to Attain the Love of God," he defines love. First, he says that love is better expressed in actions than words. Second, love is about what Ignatius calls a "mutual sharing of goods." Love, in other words, moves us to give to the one we love.

After he describes love, Ignatius guides the retreatant to meditation. He should picture himself in the presence of God and the angels, giving thanks and praise to God. Ignatius's spiritual method is notable for its emphasis on imagination. We may think of this type of imaginative prayer as a new thing or even outside the Christian tradition. It's not, and St. Ignatius is not the only Christian spiritual master to have encouraged the use of imagination in prayer.

Many of the meditations in the Exercises involve stories from the Gospels—for example, asking the retreatant to picture herself in the scene as a "poor little unworthy slave" observing the Nativity, or speaking to Jesus as he hangs on the cross: "As I behold Christ

in this plight, nailed to the cross, I shall ponder upon what presents itself to my mind.”

In this particular contemplation during the fourth and final week of the Exercises, the retreatant is called to ponder God’s love. God loves you, and you know this because of all he has given you—from earthly life to eternal life. You love God, right? So how is that love expressed? What is the gift you give to God?

### TAKE LORD, RECEIVE . . .

The more you roll this prayer around in your soul, and the more you think about it, the more radical it is revealed to be.

One of the primary themes of the Spiritual Exercises is that of attachments and affections. Ignatius offers the account of “three classes of men” who have been given a sum of money, and who all want to rid themselves of it because they know their attachment to this worldly good impedes their salvation.

The first class would really like to rid themselves of the attachment, but the hour of death comes, and they haven’t even tried. The second class would also like to give up the attachment, but do so, conveniently, without actually giving anything up.

### IS THIS SOUNDING FAMILIAR AT ALL?

The third class wants to get rid of the attachment to the money, which they, like the others, know is a burden standing in the way. But they make no stipulations as to how this attachment is relinquished; they are indifferent about the method. Whatever God wants, they want. In a word, they are the free ones.

The prayer “Take Lord, receive” is possible only because the retreatant has opened himself to the reality of who God is, what God’s purpose is for humanity, and what God has done for him in a particularly intense way.

### A RESPONSE TO GOD’S LOVE

The retreatant has seen that there is really no other response to life that does God justice. What love the Father has for us in letting us be called children of God, John says (1 John 3:1). What gift does our love prompt us to give?

In ages past, and probably in the minds of some of us still, that gift of self to God, putting oneself totally at God’s disposal, is possible only for people called to a vowed religious life. Well, God didn’t institute religious life in the second chapter of Genesis. He instituted marriage and family. I’m not a nun, but the Scriptures tell us repeatedly that all creation is groaning and being reborn and moving toward completion in God. Every speck of creation, everything that happens, every kid kicking a soccer ball down a road in Guatemala, each office worker in New Delhi, every ancient great-grandmother in a rest home in Boynton Beach, every baby swimming in utero at this moment around the world—all are beloved by God and are being constantly invited by him to love. And all can respond.

So yes, the Suscipe is a radical prayer of total self-giving. It’s not a formula for easy decision making that we can adopt one morning after a lifetime of making decisions based on other, more prosaic or even selfish reasoning. It’s the fruit of self-reflection and of openness to God’s love.

Excerpt adapted from *The Words We Pray* by Amy Welborn