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Thinking and Feelings

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Thinking and Feelings

Oil and water must be shaken violently to mix them, but thinking and feelings should be treated gently for them to complement each other. We mix oil and water when we want to use them, as in a salad dressing. Thinking and feelings already exist compatibly within us, not so much for our use but as oriented toward our well-being as fully alive, active and involved people. Whenever we separate the two for any extended period of time or while making an important decision, the results are worse than pouring oil on a salad, and then water.

We might confuse both aspects that are so integral to our internal processes by using the two words, thinking and feelings, to mean the same thing. Or, we might not have appropriate words that we can use to describe the workings of our minds and hearts that are so complementary in negotiating most aspects of our lives. For example, many of us say that "we think that it is right to fulfill our responsibilities," and interchange that expression with "we feel that it is right . . ." Neither way of describing our commitment is incorrect, but for purposes of making decisions that are wholly in keeping with our values, we do well to check both the facts and how we feel about them.

To arrive at an integral experience of knowing "this is right" when we make decisions, our minds alone are as insufficient a resource as are mere emotions. So as not to be led to false conclusions, we do well to clarify within ourselves the particular subject of each decision: what it is about, what we are thinking of saying or doing or leaving unsaid or not done, plus some of the advantages and disadvantages, and also what information we can use from our previous experiences. The second requirement for a fully human decision includes recognition of our interior perceptions of peace and of positive resonance with our thoughts, or the opposite sensations of disquiet and of dissonance with the subject of our considerations. Thinking, together with feelings, provides the essential information we need.

Each of us develops our own particular "language" for our interior dialogs – the process by which we engage a variety of thoughts and feelings. Some of us find helpful the Ignatian distinctions of "consolations and desolations," in which our thoughts might be accompanied with such affirmative interior movements as faith, hope or especially love. The opposite would be when our considerations elicit doubt, confusion, lack of trust, or a diminished sense of caring. No matter what words or concepts we use, all of us can benefit from taking some occasions to consciously note what kinds of feelings are directly associated with specific thoughts. At the level of spirituality, when our intention is to "do the right thing," thoughts that are

accompanied by consolation and positive feelings, are far more likely to be better for decision-making than those that are attached to desolation and negative feelings.

God is good, and creates us such that we have positive feelings about what really is better for us and for all, and experience negative feelings about those considerations that are less helpful. In such a way, God is pleased to assist us in our decision-making without in the least bypassing our essential freedom to love or not to love. No matter how intelligent we might be, relying on intellect alone for making decisions is like using only one leg for walking. There are facts of another order that we call feelings, which are not imagined, but which exist independently of thought. They are directly tied to thoughts and verify them as authentic or as inauthentic, true or false, helpful or hampering.

When walking, we usually move one leg at a time, and so we move forward. In making decisions, we might attend at one moment to our thoughts and at another to our feelings, and so we make progress.