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# Discernment in St. Ignatius Loyola: Guidelines for Individual Discernment

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# Discernment in St. Ignatius Loyola

## Guidelines for Individual Discernment

By **Brian McDermott, S.J.**

Ignatius wrote his guidelines for Christians who are desirous of growing in their relationship with God through friendship with Jesus and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The process of discernment helps the individual pay close attention to the evidence God is giving the person who has actively sought help from God in their decision-making.

Seeking God's will in a particular situation is not a question of trying to determine what one thing God wants me to do, what one thing fits into a pre-established plan of God. God's relationship with us is a mystery, but it helps us to choose a way of thinking about God's will that allows room for both God's freedom and our freedom. After all, that's how God creates us, to be free partners in collaborating with the Divine as God strives to bring about the fullness of God's reign. (God's reign is the world as God desires it to be.)

I like to think of God as the master jazz musician who creatively makes use of whatever good choices we make so that those choices contribute to the realization of God's project in the world, the bringing about of that reign.

The two basic conditions for authentic discernment are (1) the deep desire to seek God's will because it is God's will and (2) Ignatian "indifference," or freedom from bias regarding the alternatives being considered, so that we are open to learning what God's will is.

We are always seeking which one among several morally good alternatives will contribute to the "greater glory of God," that is, will contribute more to the whole-making of creation (myself included) in union with God.

There are some limits to this whole process of Christian decision-making. (Here I am drawing on the great work of Fr. Jules Toner, S.J.)

1. Persons discerning God's will may

discern only how God wants them to use their own freedom. Ordinarily, I cannot discern how God wants someone else to use their freedom. For example, I can discern that God wants me to propose marriage to another person, but I cannot discern that God wants me to marry that person. Another freedom is most definitely in play here!

2. I am always discerning how God wants me to use my freedom in the here and now.
3. Given #2, future events neither confirm nor deny the rightness of a discerned decision. I may get sick tomorrow and not be able to continue to implement the decision made today. That just means that I

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need to do some more discerning in the new “here and now.”

4. Another corollary of the above is that there is not an ounce of prediction in discernment. I don’t learn about the shape of the future, even of the immediate future, from a well executed discernment process.
5. I can discern only about something that I have a right to discern. For example, I may not discern to do something sinful (to state the obvious) nor may I discern something that does not fit my state of life.

Ignatius offers three situations of Christian decision-making, each characterized by a different kind of evidence from God. I believe that these are three “pure” cases, which are very helpful for our learning. But in real life, many people make decisions, even very good ones, in a more complex, zigzag fashion.

In the first situation there is actually no need for discernment, at least at the very moment when the person is in this situation. There are three elements to the situation. First, the person finds him- or herself spontaneously drawn to a particular course of action. Second, at the same time the person has the cognitive sense that choosing this course of action is of God. And third, the person finds that at the moment he or she is not able to doubt either the first or second aspects of the process. This eminently clear situation happens more often than we tend to think. (That doesn’t mean that the following day some questions might not arise: for example, what exactly was given me yesterday? Does the course of action fit what Christian faith tells me? Does the course of action fit my vocation and who I am as a person?)

Let me give a brief example. Anne is in a relationship that is bothering her greatly. She feels that something is terribly askew; she is in danger of losing connection with her true self. The spontaneous impulse arises in her to break off the relationship. Deep down she senses that this is in attunement with her true self (a way of saying that it is “of God”). She senses a deep conviction about the rightness of this move while at the same time she is very afraid that the conse-

quence of this choice might be that she will be alone the rest of her life. Still, over time, she makes the choice to end the relationship, trusting in God.

The second situation involves the discernor making use of feelings of spiritual consolation and spiritual desolation. Spiritual consolation is a light or joyful feeling that is simultaneously experienced as encouraging deeper trust in God; spiritual desolation is a heavy or depressive feeling that is simultaneously experienced as discouraging one from trusting God or encouraging one to believe that God doesn’t really care. Ignatius further wants the discernor to determine whether the spiritual consolation is deceptive or authentic, that is, over time does it lead to God and the things of God or in the opposite direction.

As another example, for a couple of weeks David finds himself drawn a number of times to make a weekend silent retreat. He notices that each time the spontaneous impulse emerges out of authentic spiritual consolation. The impulse and the feeling are connected, with the latter acting like a root or matrix whence the impulse arises. This connection gives David reason to think that the impulse is of God. But then for a stretch of time he experiences himself a couple of times as drawn to spend the weekend with his aging father. Once again the spontaneous impulse is accompanied by authentic spiritual consolation. Because this situation confuses him, he brings the two experiences to someone experienced in spiritual guidance. It becomes clear that the spiritual consolation accompanying the impulse to visit his father is considerably stronger than the earlier consolation. His guide suggests that this can be evidence that visiting his father would be more to God’s glory.

In the third situation, the person is relatively calm and, as in the other situations, deeply desirous of doing God’s will. Not having intuitive certitude or spiritual feelings, the individual uses his or her reason, weighing pros and cons and considering possible consequences of the various courses of action. The person asks the Holy Spirit to guide the reasoning process to lead to what God

desires for the person. The process is completed when the person senses that the questions that needed answering were indeed answered by the Spirit-guided reasoning process.

Jane, a young professor of social ethics at a Jesuit college, needs to make a decision about how to spend her sabbatical semester. Over time it becomes clear to her that she could spend the whole time writing several articles and trying to get them published. But she also recognizes that she might profitably spend a few weeks volunteering at a nearby L’Arche, a faith community whose core members are people with intellectual disabilities.

She prays earnestly for the Holy Spirit’s guidance while carefully weighing the pros and cons of the alternatives. She asks for Ignatian “indifference” as well, so as to be open to God’s desire about the alternatives. Over time the most convincing reason for the second alternative is that it would provide an opportunity for her to be exposed to people on the margins, the kind of folks she teaches about all the time. She concludes her discernment process with the tentative decision to combine time at L’Arche with time devoted to writing. She offers her decision to God and asks for confirmation, if God is willing to give it. After some days she hears within herself the words: “Become friends with poor people!” She accepts this as confirmation because of the deep place within her from which the interior words emerged.

All three times are valid, each in its own right. Ignatius says that if time allows, we, like Jane, can ask God for confirmation, either by God’s giving us a different kind of evidence or a repetition of the evidence that helped us earlier.

Ignatian discernment of God’s will is a process of partnering with God in one of the most important dimensions of human living: decision-making. By participating in this process we are seeking to discover how we can best contribute to God’s project in the world, the transformation of all things into the new creation God is laboring to bring about. ■