Discernment in St. Ignatius Loyola: Guidelines for Individual Discernment

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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 predic-

tion 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 obvi-

ous) nor may I discern something

that does not fit my state of life.

Ignatius offers three situations

of Christian decision-making, each charac-

terized 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 peo-

ple make decisions, even very good

ones, in a more complex, zigzag fashion.

In the first situation there is actu-

ally 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 cog-

nitive sense that choosing this course

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 sec-

ond aspects of the process. This emi-

nently clear situation happens more

often than we tend to think. (That does-

n’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 terri-

bly askew; she is in danger of losing con-

nection with her true self. The sponta-

neous 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

discerner making use of feelings of spiri-

tual consolation and spiritual desola-

tion. 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 discour-

aging one from trusting God or encour-

aging one to believe that God doesn’t

really care. Ignatius further wants the

discerner 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 con-

solation. Because this situation confus-

es him, he brings the two experiences

to someone experienced in spiritual

guidance. It becomes clear that the spiri-

tual consolation accompanying the

impulse to visit his father is consider-

ably stronger than the earlier consola-

tion. 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 situ-

ations, 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 sab-
batical 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 profit-

ably 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 weigh-

ing the pros and cons of the alterna-

tives. She asks for Ignatian “indiffer-

cence” as well, so as to be open to God’s

desire about the alternatives. Over 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 repeti-

tion 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.