

DISCERNMENT: MAKING INSPIRED CHOICES

“Just do it.”

Sounds easy, right? On the one hand, there’s something to be said for spontaneity. On the other hand, some of our choices in life require deep thought, prayer, and consideration, lest we find ourselves facing the consequences of a poor decision. That’s where the art of discernment comes in.

Discernment is a time-honored practice in the Christian tradition. In essence, discernment is a decision-making process that honors the place of God’s will in our lives. It is an interior search that seeks to align our own will with the will of God in order to learn what God is calling us to. Every choice we make, no matter how small, is an opportunity to align ourselves with God’s will. Here are some tried-and-true pointers that can help you discern God’s will.

4 STEPS OF DISCERNMENT

Step 1 – Be Aware of Yourself

Talk to Someone You Respect. God often speaks to us through the wisdom of others. Parent, Faith Formation teacher, Pastor, Sponsor (once chosen), practicing Catholic in family or parish. Seek out the wisdom of at least one and perhaps several people who you feel have the gift of wisdom and ask for their advice.

Find Some Solitude. It’s good to talk to other people when making important decisions, but at some point, it is crucial to make some time to be alone with your thoughts and with God. Invite God into your decision-making process.

Take the Time to Get to Know Yourself. Make an honest self-assessment of your faith life. How regularly do you pray, attend Mass, and read scripture? What is your level of involvement in service to your parish and its community? Know your likes and dislikes, your fears and dreams, your hopes and interests, your abilities and limitations. Get to know how you work under stress, what kind of leadership you respond to, how much structure you need in your life. See how others view you in work situations, under stress, and at leisure. Reflect on how you view others.

Accept Yourself as You Are. As you get to know yourself, accept what you find. Remember that no matter how you might find yourself, God created you and loves you.

Step 2 – Be in Touch with God

Tell God What It Is That You Desire and What You Fear. Give everything to God in prayer. Every single thing. Don’t hold anything back. (Lk 11:5-15) Be honest and tell God what your deepest desires and fears are in this situation. Before you can say the words, “thy will be done,” be sure you are truly in touch with your own will; otherwise it will come back to bite you! Remember, Jesus agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Let God Speak to You. Most of us don’t actually hear a voice when God speaks to us. However, pay attention closely to the ways that God is speaking to you. What kind of thoughts, feelings (especially love, joy, and peace, or a lack thereof), and memories might God be stirring within you to help you make your decision? What Scripture story or saint’s life comes to mind that might enlighten your decision? Find the passage or story and prayerfully read it. Pray to the Holy Spirit to guide you as you randomly open your Bible. You’ll be surprised with the messages you may receive. Be open to the Scripture passages.

Develop a Practice of Prayer. No relationship develops between persons unless they listen to each other. You must learn to listen to God in prayer and not merely ask Him to listen to you. Experiment with various forms of prayer until you find those which help you feel connected. Many good books on prayer are available today, such as “You – Prayer for

Beginners and Those Who Have Forgotten How,” by Mark Link, S.J., a guideline for prayerful contemplation and conversation with God. It suggests various forms of experimentation in prayer. Another is “He Touched Me,” by John Powell, S. J. (both by Argus Communications).

Pray to Do God’s Will. As difficult as it may be, pray the words “thy will be done,” asking God to give you the strength you need to discern his will and to follow it. Involvement in the church not only brings us closer to God, it brings us closer to the church community. Sharing important beliefs and values with others in your community is a precious gift.

Step 3 – The Decision-Making Process Itself

Start with What You Know. Lay out all of the facts in front of yourself so that you can deal with the known before you delve into the unknown!

Know that God Has a Plan for You. Remind yourself that you are not on your own and that you don’t have to yell and scream to get God’s attention to help you in this matter. On the contrary, remind yourself that God has a plan for you and that his plan is driven purely by love.

Make sure what you are “feeling” called to do is from God. Compare what you are feeling called to do with what the Bible says and what the Church teaches. If what you’re “feeling” goes against either than it probably isn’t from God. (Mt 6:9-13).

Look at the Big Picture. Try to project what effect your decision will have on you five and ten years from now. Remember, however, that you are still young. While a Catholic has serious obligations to be confirmed, it is most important that it occur when you are ready.

Prayerfully Commit. At some point, you need to act. Knowing that you have sought God’s will, set forth to do the loving thing. Commit totally to doing God’s will, no matter what it is. Be open to doing something surprising, brave, and new. God’s been known to ask that (Mt 16:25-28).

Wait. If you are really unsure, or if circumstances allow, you can wait before making your decision. Continue to pay attention to your feelings to see which direction you are being drawn to. And remember to keep communicating with God through prayer.

Step 4 – Confirm Your Decision

Check Out the Fruits. Discernment is ongoing. After you make your decision, prayerfully evaluate it. If the fruits (outcomes) of your decision – your words, actions, and behaviors – are good, then it is a good indication that the decision you made is good. If the fruits are “rotten,” then it is a good indication that you may need to alter your course. True discernment results in good fruit (even if it’s something we wouldn’t normally pick out for ourselves). Do you feel a deep sense of peace – that is a feeling of deeper unity with God and with others (Col 1:9-14)?

Answering the Call. Each student who answers the call to Confirmation Preparation and Discernment will meet at some time with the Pastor and Faith Formation Coordinator and Confirmation Teachers to review your decision before you become an official Candidate for Confirmation.

Spend Time in Prayer. You should feel an inner peace and satisfaction with your decision. Look for a feeling of true peace and tranquility, and not simply the relief that follows a difficult decision.

Get Involved! Search out information about the various ministries and communities of faith and service that you might become involved with. Consider which ones might be a good fit for you. Talk to your priest, parishioners, and other members of your faith community. Visit other churches and attend other Masses. Remember that you are becoming a member of a global faith, and think of ways that you can share your gifts and talents with others.