

GUIDE TO DISCERNMENT



What is discernment?

The word “discern” itself means to exercise judgment. It begins with a desire to do God’s will over your own. Discernment allows you to more fully focus on, and recognize, God’s voice in your life. When thoughts and opportunities arise or remain elusive, discernment is the process of judging whether or not God is the source of the leading.

How does God communicate with us?

God can communicate with us in many different ways, some of the most common ways God communicates with us are:

- Feelings
- Answered prayers
- Scripture
- Other people
- Dreams
- Nature
- Circumstances
- Insight

What characteristics are essential in discernment?

- *Openness*: Abandon any preconceived outcomes you may have and enter into discernment with an openness to accept any possible result.
- *Humility*: Recognize your imperfection and be willing to learn and be guided by God and others.
- *Selflessness*: Put your own desires aside, especially those driven by passions, and open your heart – putting no conditions on what God might call you to be or do.
- *Courage*: It takes courage to give up control and put the decision in God’s hands. Be ready to act boldly, if necessary, and be prepared to take risks.
- *Knowledge of Yourself*: Seek to grow in knowledge of yourself, becoming aware of your own strengths, weaknesses, and tendencies. *The evil one will always attack you at your weakest points, so you must know your own weaknesses.* By knowing yourself, you will also become more sensitive to the way God communicates with you personally.
- *Honesty*: Be honest with yourself and your feelings. You may feel called to do something difficult or uncomfortable. If you discern that call is from God, embrace it in the same way that you would embrace an “easy” or “favorable” calling.
- *Patience*: Understanding God’s will is an ongoing process. If you experience no feelings of consolation or peace while discerning, you must wait.
- *Quiet*: In order to listen to God, you have to make yourself quiet. This includes quieting the chatter of your mind. Meditation and centering prayer are good methods to “become quiet” before God.

Things to Remember

It is important to realize that *only you* can discern for yourself. You will never learn to discern God’s will if you expect others to tell you the answer. This does not mean that you should not seek help — you should, but the other person should only help you to discern through counsel, guidance, or direction.

As St. Ignatius Loyola reminds us, “One who earnestly strives to do God’s will is consoled by God.”

- He defines this consolation as: Every increase in faith, hope and love, and all interior joy that invites and attracts to what is heavenly, and to the salvation of our soul, by filling it with peace and quiet in its Creator and Lord.
- He defines desolation as: What is entirely the opposite of consolation . . . darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly, restlessness arising from many disturbances which lead to lack of faith, lack of hope, and lack of love. The soul is wholly slothful, tepid, sad, and separated, as it were, from its Creator and Lord.

Daily Consciousness Examen

The daily consciousness examen is a discernment practice that you might find useful. It has been recommended by the Church through the ages and focuses on prayerful reflection of one's experiences. Here is a recommended list of steps:

1. Begin by asking the Holy Spirit to guide you.
2. Look back on your day, and notice the gifts and blessings of God through the day, in a spirit of thankfulness.
3. Ask Jesus to teach you, and ask that you might know his voice better. Then go back over the day in your mind, looking at it with Jesus.
4. Ask questions like: Was I acting as God would have wanted me to act? What moved me to act in that way? What were my feelings? What was the first feeling that moved me to speak or act in that way? Where did that feeling come from? Is there anything in this event that might point to my need for healing? What will help me the next time I encounter a similar situation?
5. End your time with praise and thanksgiving, focusing on the goodness of God.

St. Paul's Prayer for Discernment

And this is my prayer: that your love for one another may grow more and more with the knowledge and complete understanding that will help you to come to true discernment, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, entirely filled with the fruits of uprightness through Jesus Christ, for the glory and praise of God. *Philippians 1:9-11*

Our goal, then, is a life of discernment which leads to an instinctive sensitivity to what pleases God.

Specific Discernment Questions for Those Considering Mission

1. Have you researched the organization through which you are considering serving?
 - a. Do their values and charism align with your beliefs?
 - b. Do they serve in an area or country of geographic interest to you? International or domestic?
 - c. Do you resonate with their model of ministry in mission?
2. What are your motivations for wanting to go on mission? What makes you want to serve?
 - a. Are you fulfilling an unmet need in yourself?
 - b. Do you want to help others?
3. What gifts and talents do you possess?
 - a. How do you envision using those gifts and talents on mission?
 - b. Does the mission organization provide outlets for those gifts?
4. Do you have a spiritual director?
 - a. If not, is there anyone that you turn to for guidance in matters concerning your faith life?
5. Do you prefer to live alone or in community?
6. What do "service" and "simplicity" mean to you?
7. When you experience difficult times in your life, who or what do you turn to?
 - a. If you were overseas, how would you manage being away from your friends and family?
8. Do you anticipate needing a support group while on mission?
 - a. What sort of support does this organization provide for missionaries in the field?

Further questions on discerning a volunteer placement can be found on the St. Vincent Pallotti Center website at <http://www.pallotticenter.org/index.php?m=static&action=step1>.