

CHOOSE LIFE

A Method of Discerning Prayer

Discernment is the name given to a form of prayerful reflection that seeks to know more fully the will of God in my own life, or the life of a group to which I belong. The will of God is not some kind of static, hidden blueprint, to which I must conform. It is rather an invitation to live creatively, using my God-given gifts and talents in a way that allows me to be most fully the person I truly am, the person God has created me to be.

Discernment happens at the point where head and heart come together. It involves doing my homework – what is the actual issue here, what are my options, have I a realistic sense of my strengths and weaknesses? It also calls me to take the time to discover how I really feel about the question, at a deep level, where I find myself most drawn.

Above all, discernment involves a choice between options which are good – I do not discern whether I should become a master criminal or not! – and is carried out in confidence that God will still be with me, whichever choice I make.

In the *Spiritual Exercises* Ignatius of Loyola speaks of three moments when discernment may take place:

First, there are times when I simply know what it is that I should do, without any doubt entering in. I may or may not be able to give convincing reasons for my choice. But I could not take another path and be true to myself.

Second, there are times when, faced with possible paths ahead, I find myself greatly stirred up at the level of my feelings. I may be greatly drawn to one alternative and repelled by another. Or my feelings may see-saw back and forth as I consider the options over time.

Third, I may approach the decisions I have to make in an unruffled state, finding that I can view the different possibilities with their different reasons calmly, without great

movements of feelings in any particular direction.

For Ignatius, the ideal is where the feelings (second approach above) and the intellect (third) pull in the same direction. In authentic cases of the first kind of discernment, there is no problem. Even here, though, it is worth checking out the responses of heart and head so that I do not get carried along by a blind enthusiasm.



Jesus raises Lazarus to life. (R-60097-CW-V2)

The following prayer exercise brings together the different elements of the discernment process, and gives time for me to note the direction that they incline me towards.

I begin this prayerful reflection by taking time to become still, outwardly and inwardly, and asking for God to show me in this prayer what it would be useful for me to see.

Next I spell out for myself as clearly as I can what my real options are in the situation

that I am trying to discern. What is the actual question that I am facing, and what are the concrete alternatives?

I then map out, using four columns, the two sides of each of two alternatives that I want to explore.

For example, if I am trying to decide between teaching in the UK and voluntary work overseas, the columns would look like this:

Advantages in UK teaching	Disadvantages in UK teaching	Advantages in overseas voluntary	Disadvantages in overseas voluntary

I spend time filling in whatever comes to mind for each of these columns. Then I take some time to sit and see how I feel about each option as I look at what I have written. If I have time, I spend a while imagining that I have opted one way or the other. What does that make me feel like? What is God feeling, saying?

If the matter is now clear, or I have no more time before I have to decide, I make a decision based on what I have seen and entrust it to God. Otherwise, I may choose to come back to this prayer at a later date. Either way, I draw the prayer to a close, perhaps noting anything significant.

The Summer Day

Who made the world?
 Who made the swan, and the black bear?
 Who made the grasshopper?
 This grasshopper, I mean –
 the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
 the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
 who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down –
 who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
 Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
 Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
 I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
 I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
 into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
 how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
 which is what I have been doing all day.
 Tell me, what else should I have done?
 Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
 Tell me, what is it you plan to do
 with your one wild and precious life?

(Mary Oliver)