

Discernment: Personal

I. Presuppositions

A. Belief in God

A tri-personal God who is love

A tri-personal God who is powerful and who is the creator

A tri-personal God who is profoundly interested in me and in my decisions

A tri-personal God who desires my absolute freedom – and free response of love

A tri-personal loving God who is Lord of all Creation and desires to bring about the Divine Reign of Justice and Compassion “on earth as it is in heaven

A tri-personal God who sends the Divine Spirit into the conscious life of the believer to assist her in seeing rightly, weighing rightly and choosing rightly

B. Acceptance of reality of forces that work against God

1. “Cosmic” forces – named demons, enemy or devils in tradition (mythological description of **personal forces** committed to evil)

2. Cultural forces – common repression or projection by a whole group:

Tribe, family, city, state, nation, language group etc.

1. Personal human limitedness – psychological, cultural, intellectual, physical, temporal and spiritual

A. A willingness to spend time in paying attention to my own inner workings – thoughts, feelings, willing/choosing, or failing to choose – over time – including the outcomes of these processes.

B. Above all: a willingness to spend time in prayer, in desiring God, in seeking to know what God desires that I do for the Kingdom

*II. Where are you now and where are you going? – this is the essential question for learning to discern rather than just make a human decision.

Joseph Tetlow, S.J. (*Choosing Christ in the World*) suggests that there are at least four dynamics that attract our absolute loyalty and adherence in various ways and at different moments of our lives.

A. The Christian Tradition teaches that the human is made for God and only in God will we find and become all that we can be and really want to be. The fullness of our humanity lies in God because it is based on participation in Divine existence. The human was created to join and enjoy God in this life and for eternity. We are attracted to God through the lure of peace, joy, beauty, laughter, communion with others and a sense of loving and being loved. When one responds to union with God (with God’s initiation and help) then one will find the

opportunities and relationships that give meaning and value to all the rest of human life right here and now and for eternity.

BUT

B. Because we have been imperfectly loved in our lives by other human beings, and because we grow up in a culture that is imperfectly ordered because of a general “disorder” within our human condition, we are attracted by other possibilities that are NOT GOD dynamics – that is “false gods.”

1) The human community or condition: We can make choices toward doing something for others, for the sake of the human situation, for general social order and peace, etc. but all for human values rather than for God.

OR

2) Worse we can make choices based on the self – we make choices according to what we think will bring us personally pleasure, fame, security, freedom from worry, freedom from death and suffering, etc. Most of these choices are ordered to “getting our wants met” even when we disguise that movement in various ways.

OR

3) Worst of all, we make choices for a consuming force for destruction – ours or others. We can call this fall god simply “the dark.” This is a choice for violence for the pleasure it can bring, or greed in order to beat someone else out, or cruelty (for the sake of cruelty). This attraction is usually NOT the first step we take away from God, but is what we tend to move toward if we have made consistently selfish mistakes because there are malevolent “spirits” within us and in the world that want to destroy all the God has created simply for the pleasure of destruction!

So . . . We have to discern where we are headed or what our principle attractions are based on.

Simple questionnaire:

1. What do you spend your time on? Why? What is the reason for spending this time?
2. What do you spend your money on? Why? What is the purpose or end for spending the bulk of your material wealth?
3. Where does your energy go? To what end is it directed?
4. When you have “free” moments, how do you use the time?
5. What is the one reality in your life that you absolutely will not give up willingly?
6. Where does your hope or confidence lie?
7. What are you most afraid of?

If you can answer these questions with any honesty, they will give you a clue as to whether you are “ordered” toward God, pleasure, your own security, wealth or power, destruction of yourself, others, the earth.

Then you have to decide which of the four dynamics you want to be the primary attraction of your life.

True Spiritual Discernment is about determining what it is that God desires for you to do (or to have) for the sake of the Reign of God. According to Ignatius' First Principle and Foundation *everything* of the created order is given to you to support you and your work on behalf of God's Kingdom – this includes everyone and everything in your life.

If what you possess enables you to serve God's Kingdom better you should use and enjoy it (toward that end). If what you possess gets in the way of your relationship with God and service of God's Kingdom, then you should get rid of it, cease to want it, or allow God to transform your desires or needs away from it.

Consider the following:

The practice of discernment helps you to determine what it is that God desires for you. God will shape your sense of his desire within your own affections and desires. Thus, it is necessary and important that you pay attention to the “movement” of “spirits” within your own conscious, embodied life. The Spirit (or spirits) of God will lead you toward God's desire by transforming your desires (only at your permission or your request, however). The various spirits of evil will do all that is possible to distract you from pursuing God or from discovering what it is that God desires. Spirits of evil will confuse you, frighten you, bore you, distract you, convince you that you are crazy or that everyone will hate you (or laugh at you) – or in any way keep you from relating with God or doing the work of God's Kingdom because evil is defeated when persons actively seek to be in relationship with God.

At any given time you can be motivated by God's Spirit, other good spirits AND some various evil spirits. The key to discernment is learning how evil generally functions in your situation. What is it that keeps you from doing what you know is the good thing to do? What stops you from seeking a deeper relationship with God? What keeps you focused on being number 1 in your own life?

You can do on-going, daily discernment about your on-going life (very important)

AND

You may decide to take special time to discern God's desire in a specific situation (job search, whether to follow this career path or that one. Whether to buy a home, seek a partner in marriage, engage in this or that level of committed volunteerism, whether to be committed to a group (such as CLC) whether to live here or there, etc.)

Example of a general, on-going discernment:

You want to make a difference in your community in regard to a particular justice situation. You have already determined that it is a good thing to be actively concerned

about the poor.(God seems to want that for you, and you clearly want it for you for God's sake) You know it would be a **good idea or even necessary to undertake some action toward alleviating a specific situation of suffering.** Here are some key questions to ask of yourself:

Why is it important to you to be involved in this particular project and not another one? To impress others? It is in front of you and you have some gifts that might be well used to address it? You are trained for this work? You are the person on the spot to deal with it? Someone you care about is suffering from it. You simply hate to see people suffer like this – it makes you angry? It will look good on your resume? You can get social benefits at work from being involved with it? Some combination of these?

So the first discernment is **where you are** on a journey toward God, and what you are aimed toward? Does the desire to serve better in God's Kingdom motivate you more or some personal reason, selfish or otherwise? (We almost always have some personal motivation about what we do

If you determine that you ought to be undertake this work because it will eventually enable you to serve God's kingdom then you ask these questions
What prevents me from doing this or wanting to do this?

Is it time waste that is pleasurable? – drinking, computer games, reading a sports story, watching games, gambling, etc.?

If the pleasure is not bad in itself (watching sports on TV, drinking alcohol in moderation when you are legally of age, playing computer games, etc. then the question is not so much a moral discernment as a spiritual discernment – is this the best use of my time, for the greatest good?)

Daily or ordinary discernment – some daily prayer, Examen, journaling

Process:

- Discover what you are now doing and consider is that what you want to be doing?
- Ask God to show you what would be a better way for making daily choices
- Pay attention to the person of Jesus as he is witnessed in the Gospels. What does his behavior tell you about him? About you?
- When you determine a particular pattern of daily choosing that is not good for you ask for help in changing it.
- Pay attention to the choices that give you a sense of peace, courage, hope, delight, confidence.
- Pay attention to your feelings of guilt, anger, despair, anxiety, defeat, pleasure without satisfaction, emptiness, meaninglessness.
- What events or behaviors seem to be attached to what feelings? Remember that Consolation is not good feelings but anything that moves you toward God or away from behavior that is destructive.

- Talk over these discoveries with a trusted adviser who does discernment him/her self

Special Discernment: Discovering God's will in a particular "crossroads" event such as choice of a major, graduate or professional school, career, particular job offer etc.

1. Assess why you are making the decision and what are you making the decision for?
2. What is the basic orientation of your life? To God, humanity, self or the dark?
3. Set aside a certain amount of time (a week or two if possible) to make the discernment.
4. Pray for the freedom from your own selfish interests to be able to consider what God may be asking of you (remember it will be for your joy)
5. If you find yourself distressed or frightened, pray for peace and the confidence that God loves you deeply.
6. Be aware of the ways you get "trapped" by your own patterns of sin or harm.
7. After several days of praying for guidance, assert one side of the decision:

i.e. "I will take the teaching position in Kansas City at XXX school"

8. Then spend a day or two thinking of every reason you can AGAINST this decision (i.e. "not enough money, too far from home, in a bad part of town, too expensive to live there, I don't know anyone, my parents don't want me to go, etc. etc.")
9. After you have a thorough list, put it away for a day and simply pray to discover what it is that God is asking from you. Ask for freedom, and ask for God to show you where your own blindness is.
10. Take out your list of negatives and weigh them against your deepest values of the Gospel, of life, etc. (note: if you are seeking God's will, you usually reason in the opposite way of the American Culture.)
11. Where do you feel fear? Where peace? Etc. If you have been paying attention to these affects in your life you will be able to do this faster.
12. Put the list away and renew your prayer for freedom and insight.

Part II – Pro's

1. After several days of prayer for freedom and insight make a list of all the reasons FOR your position statement. (It will be good for me to move away from the family and find my own identity, the money is adequate or even great, it gives me a chance to try my wings in teaching in a safe environment, it allows me to teach children in a poor area who need special help, etc. etc.)

Remember that many of these reasons may be the opposite side of the coin of your cons – but don't worry about that

2. Again put the list away when you think you have listed every reason for the statement you can think of.

3. How do you feel at this point? Are you confident that God loves you and will guide you? Do you have conflicting feelings? Can you pinpoint the sources of the conflict?
4. Take out the list and weigh the merit of each reason – throw away unworthy reasons and get to the key reasons why you want to do it. Are they reasons that go with the Gospel?
5. Imagine talking over these reasons with Jesus in a warm and friendly place. He is there as a very good friend and cares deeply that you make a good decision – how does it feel to talk it over with him?
6. Or . . . If a friend of yours (that you really care about) came to you and laid out reasons for an against an issue the way you have how would you imagine advising the person to go? Make the choice based on that wisdom.

Talk over the process and your reasoning with your advisor. Does S/he have any other suggestions for reasons that you may have overlooked? How do you feel about such suggestions?

Make a decision and imagine yourself living with it . . . how does it feel? Do you feel energized? Peaceful? Excited? Enthusiastic? Does it feel “right” for you even if a little frightening? Where is your fear located?

For the next two or three days bring your decision to God in prayer and ask God to indicate whether this is a good decision or not, whether it will bring you life. Be very attentive to your inner sensibilities during this time.

NOTE: There is never a guarantee that you have chosen God’s will until you live into the choice and determine what “fruit” is drawn from it. Are you a more mature person? Are you generally happy? Are things working rather well? Even if the work is challenging does it give you a sense of peace and happiness that you are involved in it? With every experience of discernment keep track of the reasons that you make the choices you make.

Consolation without cause: Sometimes God will intervene rather directly and grant you a huge sense of “rightness” about a decision even before you do all the pros and cons. Usually this will come at a time that you are not praying, but you will be flooded with joy, hope, courage and a sense that this is truly what you are “called” to do. Furthermore, the material conditions will come together to make this work for you even when it didn’t seem possible for that to happen.