



# Spirituality Liverpool

## Some principles for making prayerful decisions



To 'discern' means to seek to discover what God wants you to do. [St. Ignatius of Loyola](#) (the founder of the Roman Catholic order called the Society of Jesus, better known as the Jesuits) offers guidelines for discernment to help you discover what God is calling you to do in the big and small decisions of your life that can be extremely helpful.<sup>1</sup>

### Background

The practice of discerning God's will goes back to the Hebrew scriptures, through the Christian scriptures, and is developed by various traditions such as [Benedictine](#) and [Franciscan](#) spiritualities. Ignatius did not invent spiritual discernment, but he built on this tradition as an observer of spiritual life both in himself and others. He believed that God communicates directly with each of us in our hearts, minds, and souls through our feelings, thoughts, and desires. However, he knew that not all of our thoughts, feelings, and desires were from the Spirit. He developed these guidelines for discernment to help us figure out which are from God, and which are not.

### Observations

- Discernment - seeking to know and follow God's will - makes sense in the context of a personal loving relationship with God. If you love someone, you want to have a good relationship with them, talk to them often, grow closer to them, and trust that their love means they want what's best for us. So it is with God.
- Discernment often involves choosing between 'good' choices or courses of action, and not between 'good' and 'bad'. If our decision is between 'good' and 'bad', that's not a matter for discernment. We just need to do what we know is right. When choosing between two or more 'goods', discernment is about seeking the greater good.
- Discernment can be a struggle. If there were no inner struggle, if God's will for you were perfectly clear, there would be no need for discernment.

## Seven attitudes required for an authentic discernment process

At the beginning of his book [\*The Spiritual Exercises\*](#), Ignatius spells out seven basic attitudes as preconditions for entering into an authentic discernment process seeking God's will:

### 1. Openness:

Approach the decision with an open mind and heart. You cannot find God's will for you if we enter into the decision-making process with a preconceived outcome based on your will, biases, and 'attachments'. 'Attachments' refer to areas in our lives where we limit freedom and put conditions on a decision.

### 2. Generosity:

Openness requires a generous spirit with which we, with a largeness of heart, put no conditions on where God might call us - like giving God a signed 'blank cheque' and letting God fill in the rest. Only a generous person would do this.

### 3. Courage:

Openness and generosity require courage, for God might be asking something difficult, challenging, and risky. It takes courage to give up control and trustingly put the decision in God's hands while seeking God's will over our own. There's no telling where God might be calling us.

### 4. Interior freedom:

Openness, generosity and courage require interior freedom - a deep desire to do what God wills with no conditions attached. Ignatius describes three types of people and their differing approaches to decision making (*Spiritual Exercises*, [149-155]):

#### a) **The first type is 'all talk and no action.'**

This kind of person is full of good intentions but remains so distracted by his or her busyness about so many relatively inconsequential things that they never get around to the 'one thing necessary,' namely, God's will for them. Not to decide ends up being their decision.

#### b) **The second type of person does everything but the one thing necessary.**

These people may do all kinds of good things in their life but don't face the central issue of what God is calling them to. They are in effect putting conditions on what God can call them to. They'll do good things as long as it doesn't ask too much of them - especially demand a total commitment that would call them to adjust their priorities to what God is asking of them and thus put God's will first in their lives. An example could be, 'I'll enter into any career as long as it will support me in an upper middle class lifestyle.' This would preclude a lot of options God might be calling us to!

#### c) **The third type of person is the only one who is truly free.**

Their whole and deepest desire is to do whatever God's will is for them with no conditions attached. This is the attitude necessary to authentically find and follow God's will for us.

## 5. Prayerful reflection on experience:

How can we hear God's call if we're not listening? How can we listen, if we're not praying? To make a prayerful decision put aside a portion of time, as often as possible, to quiet yourself, become aware and grounded in God's presence, and listen to what God is saying to you in the interior of your heart. Ignatius recommends 'The Examen of Consciousness' or simply the 'Examen':

- Begin with an awareness of God's presence with you here and now, and ask for guidance to prayerfully reflect on your day.
- Reflect on your day and ask yourself how God has been present in the events and encounters of your day and in the feelings you experienced that day.
- How has God called you through these experiences, and how have you responded?
- What are you most grateful for? What has given you life?
- What are you least grateful for? What has drained life from you?
- Ask for guidance to see from these patterns where God is calling you.
- Thank God for the blessings of the day.
- Ask forgiveness for any failures to respond well to God well during the day.
- Ask for help to respond generously to God's calls to you in the coming day.

## 6. Having one's priorities straight:

If loving and serving God and each other is the ultimate goal of our lives, then everything else must be a means to that end.

'What we want above all is the ability to respond freely to God, and all other loves for people, places, and things are held in proper perspective by the light and strength of God's grace...In coming to a decision, only one thing is really important - to seek and to find how God is calling me at this time of my life...God has created me out of love, and my salvation is found in my living out a return of that love. All my choices, then, must be consistent with this given direction in my life.' (*Spiritual Exercises*, [16, 169, 23]).

## 7. Not confusing ends with means:

Are we putting our own 'attachments' first, before the needs of the community and the call of God? One example of confusing ends with means is a person who first chooses to make a lot of money and be successful and only afterwards look at how they might serve God with this (such as by making charitable donations or volunteering). A person like this in effect puts God into second place, only wanting God to come into their lives after first choosing what they want.

Having these seven essential attitudes of openness, generosity, interior freedom, prayerful reflection on experience, having one's priorities straight, and not confusing ends with means, the discernor has their satellite dish pointed in the right direction in order to receive God's signals.

## Three Distinct 'Times' or Situations for Decision Making

Ignatius observes that in making an important decision we tend to find ourselves in one of three basic situations. We tend to either feel:

1. inner clarity or certainty about what to do
2. inner conflict about what to do, feeling pulled in different directions
3. clueless - there is not much of anything going on inside.

If we find ourselves in the first situation, we're lucky - we know what we should do and just have to go ahead and do it. If we're not so lucky to have this inner clarity (and we're often not) Ignatius gives the following suggestions to help us make a good, prayerful decision when we're feeling conflicted and uncertain.

### **Seven practical discernment techniques**

1. Put before your mind the matter about which you need to decide.
2. Pray for the grace to 'try to be like a balance at equilibrium, without leaning to either side' (*Spiritual Exercises* [179]). Try not to prefer one option, only desire God's will.
3. Pray for God to enlighten and move you to seek only what is most directed to God's service and praise.
4. Imagine someone you have never met who seeks your help in how to respond to God's call in the same decision you are considering. Observe what advice you give this person and follow it yourself. Most of us are better at giving others advice than at figuring out what we should do!
5. Imagine yourself in the presence of the unconditional love of God, having made a decision, one way or another. Imagine each scenario, one at a time. How do you feel about your decision? What would you say to God about the decision you have made? Choose the course of action that would give you greater happiness and joy in looking back on it and in presenting it to God.
6. When we do not experience inner clarity, Ignatius suggests using reason to weigh the matter carefully to attempt to come to a decision in line with our living out God's will in our lives. To do this, bear in your ultimate goal – to respond to God's call with: openness, generosity, interior freedom, prayerful reflection on experience, having one's priorities straight, and not confusing ends with means. List and weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the decision at hand. Consider which alternatives seem more reasonable and decide according to the more weighty motives – not from more selfish inclinations. Look over your list of 'pros' and 'cons', and notice if any of the reasons listed stand out from the others and why, and see which way this might point you. This can help to move from inner confusion to greater clarity, at least as to the issues that need to be attended to and help separate out which are more significant.
7. Having come to a decision, turn again to God and ask for signs of God's confirmation that the decision is leading you toward God's service and praise. The usual sign of this confirmation from God is an experience of peacefulness about the decision. The confirmed decision has a feeling of 'rightness' about it, and we feel a sense of God's presence, blessing, and love. This is a very important step, since the feeling of rightness, peace, and joy about a decision is a positive indicator that we have made

the right decision whereas feelings of anxiety, heaviness, sadness, and darkness often indicate the opposite.

## Summary

To make a good, prayerful decision, we need to:

- a) look at the decision prayerfully from all angles.
- b) take time with the decision, be patient, trust the process, and ultimately trust that God will lead you to the right place if you do your part as best you can.
- c) follow what your heart and gut tell you to do and what seems right to you. In life decisions and matters of the heart we rarely feel complete certainty and clarity. This is more than a rational process. However, once we've considered the decision prayerfully, consulted others we trust, and have attained all the data we reasonably can, we need to take a leap of faith and make a decision.

## Final Thoughts

Discernment takes us on an exciting adventure. When we give up control and take risks to follow God's lead not knowing where we will end up, with the attitudes of openness, generosity, and inner freedom, life is a lot more fun and exciting than when we try to control everything ourselves.

We need to trust that God is not going to lead us off a cliff! It is important to remember that God is loving, wants you to be happy and is going to lead you to a good place where you will find joy, fulfilment, and happiness.

That doesn't mean that where God leads you will be easy or won't involve sacrifice and even some suffering. But it will lead to a life that matters, makes a difference, has great meaning, and involves more joy than you could ever imagine or find in a life where you try to control everything and only follow your own self-determined plans. Any life worth living involves sacrifice and suffering. But if we are following God's call, it will also bring great satisfactions and joy.

## Resources:

For more information about Ignatian spirituality, visit [www.ignatianspirituality.com](http://www.ignatianspirituality.com)

The work of Dennis, Sheila & Matt Linn has made Ignatian spirituality accessible to all ages: [www.linnministries.org](http://www.linnministries.org), especially their book *[Sleeping With Bread: Holding What Gives You Life](#)* based on the Examen prayer (See Attitude 5: Prayerful reflection on experience above.)

*Kieran Bohan, October 2015*

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<sup>i</sup> Adapted from: [www.marquette.edu/faith/ignatian-principles-for-making-decisions.php](http://www.marquette.edu/faith/ignatian-principles-for-making-decisions.php)