

## Discernment in the context of a God-centered life

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(Adapted by Sister Kathleen McDonagh, IWBS, from In the Context of Discerning by Sister Marie Beha, OSC)

### What is it?

Discernment is the effort to determine, in the light of God's will, what is the best for me now, in the concrete circumstances in which I find myself. How can I best respond to the Lord? Which of the choices before me will bring me to the fullness of life?

### What assumptions precede discernment?

- I assume that God loves me and desires my love in return. God calls me to this love. God really cares about me.
- The Holy Spirit speaks to me in my life through Scripture, the Church, the individual, the community, the concrete circumstances of my life. I can hear and respond.
- I live in the midst of many voices. I need to discern which of these are God's will for me now.
- My discernment is not a choice between good and evil since evil is not God's will for me. It is a choice between two or more actions, all of them good. Which one is right for me in the here and now?
- My opinion is not enough. I live in an attitude of listening to God; I am willing to change when change is called for.

### Discernment is an attitude

Discernment is an ongoing attitude of surrender to God's will and openness to what God asks of me. It is much more a way of life than a matter of problem solving. I must ALWAYS look for God's will in my life.

Attitudes I need are:

- Seeking to have the mind of Christ always:  
*Phil. 2:5; 2 Cor. 10:5; Romans 12:2; Eph. 4:23*
- Being open to recognizing the action of the Holy Spirit in my life:  
*Acts 9:17; 13:2-4; 13:9; 15:8; 15:28; 19:1-6*
- Recognizing my own weakness and being willing to change:  
*2 Cor. 13: 3-6*
- Praying in a listening way:  
*Rom. 5:1-5*
- Waiting patiently:  
*Phil 1:23-26*

## What kind of God do I believe in?

My ongoing attitude of discernment demands of me an ongoing seeking to know who God really is.

Do I see God...

- as the stern judge with the big black book who is just waiting for me to slip off the straight and narrow path so that God can condemn me to hell?
- as a fickle Santa Claus God who may or may not say “Yes” to my ongoing “letters to Santa”?
- as Jesus Christ Superstar, one who (like all superstars) dazzles and excites for a while and then passes into oblivion?
- as any of the tremendous numbers of distorted images that I lay on God and then believe in and operate from in growing frustration?

I can see God most concretely by looking at Jesus who is “the reflection of the Father’s glory, the exact representation of the Father’s being.” (*Hebrews 1:3*) I am helped in my efforts by looking at people in the Gospels who came to know Jesus and His personal love, and then were on fire to discern and do His will. Thus, I grow in my knowledge of Jesus; my relationship with Him will strengthen.

The following passages in John help me know who Jesus is. I can learn from these models of faith and apply them to my life.

Nathaniel (*John 1:45-50*)

The Samaritan Woman (*John 4:4-26*)

The Man Born Blind (*John 9:1-38*)

Mary Magdalene (*John 20:11-18*)

## Steps I can take

There are concrete steps I can take when I am trying to discern God’s will in relation to a particular decision.

1. Formulate the question as simply and clearly as possible.
2. Study it, listing pros and cons, as many as possible, even if I don’t “like” them.
3. Pray for light to evaluate these.
4. Discuss the questions with others who have greater experience and insight.
5. Make a prayer-based decision.
6. Act in the light of my decision.
7. Continue to check for validation.

**Interior validation:** Do I have a basic peace as a result of my decision? Am I happy with it? Is it enabling me to grow in union with God?

**Exterior validation:** Is my decision accepted by legitimate authority? Does it result in greater love? Is it possible to carry it out?

## Further criteria

Further criteria to help me know that a decision I make is truly God's will for me.

### *Is my decision...*

1. rooted in reality so that I am able to be my true self?
  2. a free decision -- I am not forced into it psychologically, emotionally, by my own selfishness or fear?
  3. in harmony with God's deepest action in my life so that it fits a pattern in my spiritual journey? (This may include some difficulties that must be surmounted and suffering that must be accepted.)
  4. one that springs from my relationship with God so that I can take it comfortably to God?
  5. respectful of the rights of others so that I live in fidelity to my real obligations to others without being chained by their unreasonable demands?
  6. a service decision that helps me to serve others better, be more compassionate, more loving, my best self?
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## Prayer for Discernment

My Lord God,  
I have no idea where I am going.  
I do not see the road ahead of me.  
I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself.  
And the fact that I think I am following  
your will does not mean that I am  
actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please  
you does in fact please you.  
And I hope that I have that desire in all  
that I am doing.  
And I know that if I do this, you  
will lead me by the right road  
though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust you always  
though I may seem to be lost  
and in the shadow of death, I will  
not fear, for you are ever with me  
and you will never leave me  
to face my struggles alone.

--Thomas Merton