

Journey of Faith



In Short:



- Discernment is a decision-making process in which we seek God's will.
- Saint Ignatius of Loyola offers a seven-step discernment process.
- We must all practice discernment as part of our growth in the faith journey.

"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it. But you know it, because it remains with you, and will be in you."

John 14:16–17

The Holy Spirit leads us into the truth and helps us discover and walk God's path for our lives. But the Holy Spirit isn't the only voice that seeks to guide us in life. Many other voices call out to us, seeking to attract us and influence us to walk in a particular direction.

Discernment

Should I marry Chris? Have I chosen the right career? Should I become a lector or a cantor? When it comes to making decisions, many of us would like to call God and say:

"I don't know what to do right now. If you'd just point the way, that would be great."

- *How do you usually make decisions? Do you follow your head or your heart? Do you write down options or ask the advice of others?*



Divine guidance is available to us. As Christians, we believe the Holy Spirit lives in our hearts, giving us a sense of God's will for our lives. Before he left this world to return to his Father, Jesus promised us the gift of his Spirit. He told his disciples:

- *What other voices influence your decisions?*



The decision-making process (often called **discernment**) can be complicated by our lack of self-knowledge, lack of inner freedom, and desire to manipulate God into saying "yes" to what we want. Yet, with the Holy Spirit on our side and a willingness to learn—through reading, talking with mature Christians, and trial-and-error—we'll begin to recognize and discern the voice of God.

No foolproof paths lead us to certainty concerning God's will in a particular situation, but some guidelines can help us grow in our ability to perceive and discern God's will. Saint Ignatius of Loyola offers some in his *Spiritual Exercises*. As we grow in the art and gift of discernment, we'll develop a method that works best for us.

Seven Steps of Discernment

Here are seven steps that are based on the guidelines of St. Ignatius of Loyola:

1. Determine the question.

We start by clearly stating what we're trying to decide. For example: *Should I change careers? Should I end this relationship? Should I join this ministry in my parish?* Throughout the process, we ask God to reveal his truth and give us the inner freedom to carry it out.

2. Gather information.

We reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative, being as creative as possible. There may be more options than just quitting or continuing a job or relationship. Perhaps it's possible to continue in a job or relationship but work toward (or even demand) some definite changes.

We write down the pros and cons of each alternative and take into consideration the effect each alternative may have on our relationship with God, family, or others.

We consider how each alternative fits into the rhythm of your life. God sometimes invites us to a task that's completely different from the way things have always been. If that's what God is doing in our life, we need to recognize that our special abilities and life experiences are in some way a preparation for this new calling.

We identify potential obstacles: *What excessive needs, attachments, or compulsions might prevent me from hearing God's word and doing it? To what extent am I attached to an alternative? How free am I to embrace another direction if I believe it's God's will for me?* Recognizing and admitting obstacles to our inner freedom requires honesty, courage, and patience.

- *What needs or attachments might keep you from seeking God's will in this decision?*



We seek out a good counselor. Saint Ignatius tells us that the devil loves secrecy, whereas God blesses openness. The Bible advises us to "seek counsel from every wise person, and do not think lightly of any useful advice" (Tobit 4:18). It's important to seek the input of a wise spiritual director or friend who knows us well.

3. Pray about the options.

The heart of Christian discernment is the act of bringing the available options to prayer and seeing which option gives us the greatest sense of God's presence, peace, and joy.

"Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding and my entire will, all that I have and possess. You have given all to me, Lord, I return it. All is yours; do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace, that is enough for me."

From the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola

As we pray, we consider if we want one option more than the others. If we do, we ask: *How willing am I to let go of that option if it seems God's calling me in another direction?*

Sometimes, we aren't truly free to move in another direction because of attachment to a particular choice. In situations like this, we need to pray for the grace of inner freedom.

True inner freedom means that we're detached enough from every available option to be free to walk down any path God may call us to walk. It may take weeks or months to come to that point of inner freedom. Ideally, we won't choose an option until we're truly detached.

This part of the discernment process is the most important and challenging. It isn't easy to sincerely say, "Thy kingdom come; thy will be done." Having attained a degree of inner freedom through grace, we pray about the various options available, noting our inner reactions and feelings about each.

We imagine living out a particular alternative. The option that consistently fills us with the presence of God's peace and joy over a period of time is most likely God's will.

It may surprise us to know that our truest self desires God's will. It's the false, sinful, and unredeemed self that doesn't believe God's will leads to true freedom and happiness.

Saint Ignatius suggests we consider these questions:



- What advice would you give to another person faced with this same situation?
- Imagine yourself on your deathbed looking back over your life. What do you wish you had chosen in each situation?
- Picture yourself standing before God at the Final Judgment and consider what decision you would then wish to have made.

4. Make a decision.

At some point, we need to make a decision. We go with the option that gives us the most peace in prayer.

If we experience no real peace about the options, we may either postpone the decision or choose the least troublesome option. We shouldn't decide when in doubt, and, if time permits, we continue to pray until we experience peace.

We're aware that the option chosen may not always be the most attractive one or the one we most desired. Sometimes we may feel led to choose an option with tears—for example, to return to a marriage situation that in the past caused much pain. Such initial tears of sadness, however, often give way to tears of joy.

5. Live with the decision.

Once we come to a decision, it's good to live with it for a while before we act on what we decided. This is particularly important if we have a tendency to be impulsive. We ask the Holy Spirit to give us the power and courage to act on what we believe to be God's will for our life.

6. Act on the decision.

This step can be the most difficult because it may involve giving up something to which we're still quite attached. We ask the Holy Spirit to give us courage to act on what we believe to be God's will for our life.

7. Seek confirmation of the decision.

If the choice we make bears good fruit, we can be sure we acted in accord with God's will. That's not to say that there won't be struggles or times we wonder if we made the right choice.

Knowing we made a sincere effort to seek God's will is enough. Discernment is an art learned through trial and error. God doesn't demand that we always discern perfectly; he asks only that we seek his will and act on what we discern.

"Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the LORD, your God, obeying his voice, and holding fast to him. For that will mean life for you."

Deuteronomy 30:19–20

Helps for Discernment

1. Living a God-centered life: If the basic orientation is material gain, friendship, attainment of power, or pleasure, all of our choices will be made out of this orientation. Jesus' basic orientation was different.
2. Personal knowledge of God and God's ways: The primary way to come to a knowledge of God is through prayer and meditation on the life of Jesus.
3. Reflective living: Regular periods of reflective silence in the presence of God help us grow in self-knowledge and see those areas in which we're controlled by our needs, compulsions, and attachments.
4. Genuine openness to God: We may be locked into a narrow understanding of God and his ways. We want to truly recognize God in the person of Jesus and not settle for a version of God that's a product of our imagination.
5. Self-knowledge: We need to be in touch with our thoughts, feelings, and actions. We need to be aware of excessive needs and attachments that diminish our inner freedom to say "yes" to God.

- How might regularly including God in my decision-making change my life?



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