

# Journey of Faith



## In Short:



- Spiritual discernment is a decision-making process in which we seek God's will.
- Saint Ignatius of Loyola offers a seven-step discernment process.
- Discernment plays a large part in our spiritual growth and faith journey.

While God might not send us a timeline of exactly what we need to live out his plan for us, we can still get divine guidance as we make decisions. As Christians, we believe that the Holy Spirit lives within us and gives us a sense of God's will for our lives. Before Jesus left this world, he promised us the gift of his Spirit, telling his disciples:

*"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. There are many other voices in the world competing for our attention and trying to influence us in a particular direction—and not all of these voices have our best interest in mind.

## Discernment

*Did I pick the right college major? Should I get more involved with youth group? Do I quit my part-time job to make more time for volunteer work?*

Life is full of decisions, and a lot of us would like to be able to just ask God what we need to do and have God give us the right answer. It can be difficult to know what God is calling us to do with our lives, especially when it seems like everything in our lives is changing all at once or when we don't have much time left to make a choice.

- How do you make big decisions?
- Do you tend to follow your head or your heart?



- What other voices try to influence your decisions?
- Which of these voices are positive influences? Why?
- Which voices are influences you try to avoid? Why?



The process of making a well-informed, thoughtful decision is called discernment. Authentic discernment can be complicated because of our lack of self-knowledge and our desire for God to say “yes” to what we want, which can lead to us manipulating or ignoring the guidance we receive from the Spirit. However, as long as we have a willingness to learn and an openness to the Holy Spirit, we’ll begin to notice and discern the true voice of God.

There’s no one-size-fits-all path that leads us to God’s will with certainty in all situations. It’s not that easy. But there are some guidelines that can help you grow in your ability to know and understand God’s will when you’re faced with a decision. Saint Ignatius of Loyola offers some guidelines in his *Spiritual Exercises* that can get you started. As you grow in faith and cultivate the gift of discernment, you’ll develop a method that works best for you. To get you started, below are seven steps based on the guidelines of St. Ignatius of Loyola.

## Seven Steps of Discernment

### 1. State the decision you need to make clearly.

Before you can discern what God is calling you to do, you need to know what you’re trying to decide. For example: *Should I end this relationship or friendship? Should I choose this college? Should I get more involved in this form of ministry?* As you focus on this question, be sure to remember God throughout the decision-making process. Continuously ask God for help in knowing his truth and ask God to give you the inner freedom and courage to carry out that truth.

### 2. Gather important information.

Think about the possible choices you could make. Consider the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative. Be creative as you think about each possible scenario. A situation that may seem to have only two options, like continuing or ending

a friendship, may have more possibilities. You might be able to work toward a compromise after a disagreement or only see that friend under certain conditions.

It may help to write down the pros and cons of each alternative. Include the effects of each alternative on your relationship with God, family, the community, or others. Also consider how each alternative may affect your life. Is God calling you to step out of your comfort zone and change the way things have always been? Is God asking you to use your talents in a way you never expected, planned for, or thought of before? Identify any potential obstacles to carrying out each alternative and determine which ones are valid (like, this alternative would put someone else at risk or clearly goes against what you know is right) and which ones only seem to be obstacles (like, fear of the unknown or the desire for things to stay familiar and unchanged).

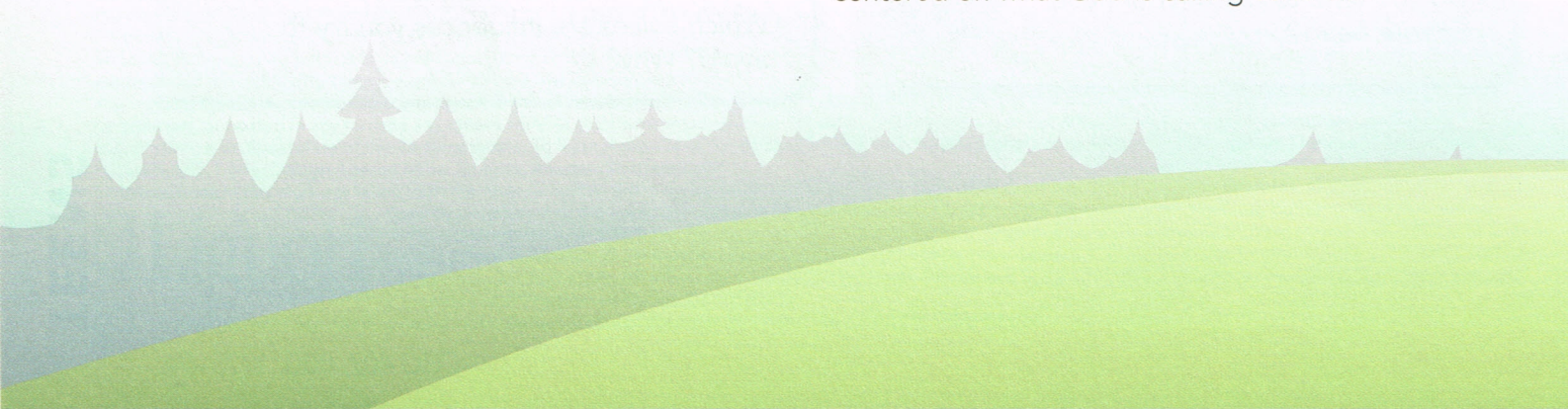
This process requires a lot of honesty, courage, and patience. If you feel you need a second opinion, ask a trusted friend or advisor who you know has a strong faith and will help you put God’s will first.

### 3. Bring your information to prayer.

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

As you begin to bring these options to prayer, you may notice there’s one option you want more than all the others. If there is, ask yourself: *How am I willing to let go of this option if God calls me in another direction?*

It’s easy to get attached to a particular option, and that attachment can keep us from really listening if God calls us somewhere else. That’s why we pray for the grace of inner freedom. Inner freedom means that we are free from our emotions and unhealthy attachments and truly open to making a decision centered on what God is calling us to do.



This part of the discernment process is the most important and the most challenging. It isn't easy to sincerely pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will (not mine) be done." Though if you've prayed for the grace of inner freedom and sincerely desire the Spirit to work in your decision-making process, it can get easier. Our truest self always desires God's will. It's our false, unredeemed self that falls to the temptations of earthly freedom and happiness.

Saint Ignatius suggests three exercises to help us as we consider our decision:

- *What advice would you give to someone else facing the same decision?*
- *Imagine you're on your deathbed looking back over your life. What would you wish to have chosen?*
- *Imagine standing before God at the Final Judgment. What decision would you wish to have chosen?*



#### **4. Make a decision.**

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

But what if none of the options available to you give you any real peace in prayer? In that situation, you can either postpone the decision or choose the one least troublesome option. But if you're having a lot of doubt, and you have time before a decision needs to be made, keep praying and wait to make a decision until you find one that fills you with peace.

God's option may not always be the most attractive one or the choice we desire. Doing the right thing can be painfully difficult, especially when you know it will result in the loss of a friend or letting go of a dream you've held for a long time. However, those initial tears of sadness often turn into tears of joy later on.

#### **5. Live with the decision.**

It's a good idea to live with your decision for a while before you move forward with it. This is especially important if you tend to make decisions in the heat of the moment. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you the power and courage to act on what you believe to be God's will for you.

#### **6. Act on the decision.**

Actually going through with your decision may seem like an obvious step, but this can be the most difficult. Your decision may involve giving up something you're still hesitant to let go. Keep asking the Holy Spirit for power and courage.

#### **7. Seek confirmation of the decision.**

If your choice brings you peace and bears good fruit, you can be sure you are acting in accord with God's will. That doesn't mean there won't be struggles or times you doubt you made the right choice.

Knowing you made a sincere effort to seek God's will is enough. Discernment is something we learn through trial and error, and even with the Holy Spirit as our guide we can wander into bad decisions on our own. God doesn't demand that we always discern perfectly all the time. God asks us only that we actively and sincerely seek his will, act on what we discern, and ask for forgiveness and direction when we realize we've strayed.



As a group or with a partner, brainstorm other things you can do to discern God's will when faced with a difficult decision.



As you went through these seven steps and thought more about discernment, was there a particular decision that kept coming into your mind? Think about that decision and reflect on it. Over the course of the next few days, weeks, or even months, work toward discerning God's will.



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