

Practical Suggestions for Discernment

Definition of Discernment:

“[the] practice of prayerful attention to the movements of our heart, prayerful reflection on them, and honest appraisal of what seems more in tune with God’s one action.

What leads us to greater faith, hope and love in our hearts? What seems more likely to enhance real communion and community among those with whom we live and work? Conversely, which alternative seems to close us in on ourselves and makes us more fearful and self protective?”¹

Discernment Examen:²

This sensitivity to God can be increased through the use of a “discernment examen”. It is not an examination of conscience, which looks at sin in our lives. Rather a “discernment examen” or “consciousness examen” looks at when we chose or did not choose Christ in our life (or during the day). It is a good practice to do this discernment examen at night for approximately ten minutes so that we can be sensitized to the workings of God, and our response to them. The Spirit will help you discern God’s touch from all the other movements and promptings in your life.

Exercise:

1. Relax in the presence of God. Use a psalm or a hymn to help you.
2. Thank God for everything that the Lord has brought into your life since the day before.
3. Beg to be given the mind and heart of Jesus, to see your reality as Jesus sees it.
4. Reflect prayerfully over your day by checking the “we” (what you and Jesus experienced together) rather than the “I” (you alone).
5. Visualize the events that you can say “we” about even if you were not conscious of God’s presence at the time.
6. Recall the events where you cannot say “we”.
7. Say a short prayer of repentance and sorrow for the times that you have disappointed or offended the Father.
8. Promise to repair any damage you have done to others and ask the Holy Spirit to give you the opportunity and time to do so tomorrow.

¹ William A. Barry, SJ, *Paying Attention to God: Discernment in Prayer*. Notre Dame, Ave Maria Press, 1996. p. 82.

² Taken from Rev. Chris Aridas, Discernment: Seeking God in Every Situation. Resurrection Press, Catholic Book Publishing Co., New Jersey, 2004, p. 23-4.

9. Plan for tomorrow with God by setting aside a time of prayer with Him. Make it a definite time and place.
10. End by saying the Our Father, slowly and deliberately.

As You Discern the Movement of the Spirit in your Life:

You can also look at the “fruits” of a particular decision. Even if a decision is difficult, a decision which is “of God” will bear “the fruit of the Spirit...love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.”³ Those decisions that are not of God can result in (desolation) fear, anxiety, secrecy, isolation, prejudice, passivity etc.

Pay attention to the subtle feelings and leanings (or movements in your heart) you have as you discern as well as the practical and mundane considerations such as family responsibilities, job, etc. If it is God’s plan for us, then the path would be consistent with the rest of our responsibilities in our chosen vocation (marriage, children, family).

Help On Your Way:

PRAYER

Fasting

Almsgiving

Retreats

Spiritual Direction

Others (Ask others to help you discern – ask them for their prayers and their insights)

Books on Discernment

Bibliography:

Rev. Chris Aridas, *Discernment: Seeking God in Every Situation*. New Jersey, Resurrection Press, 20041.

William A. Barry, SJ, *Paying Attention to God: Discernment in Prayer*. Notre Dame, Ave Maria Press, 1996.

³ Galations 5:22-23; Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraph 736.

William A. Barry, SJ, *A Friendship Like No Other: Experiencing God's Amazing Embrace*. Chicago, Loyola Press, 2008. (especially Chapter 14)

Good Internet site: <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/making-good-decisions/discernment-of-spirits>