

Day 4: RULES for DISCERNING the WILL of GOD

(Based in part on *The Discernment the Will of God*, by Timothy M. Gallagher, OMV)

We believe with good reason that God has a plan for our life. We are told he knew us before laying the foundations of the universe, that he knit us together in the womb, and that he has plans for our success.

And the modus operandi of Ignatian spirituality is to seek and choose the highest and best among all options. As we continue doing that in life it will move us progressively closer to God.

St. Ignatius provides three “modes” for discerning God’s will in specific situations. It is self-evident, but bears repeating, this is discernment for major life decisions = particularly those that are deeply connected to our vocation (married life, religious life, consecrated single life).

First Mode: Clarity without Doubt

St. Ignatius says, “The first time is when God Our Lord so moves and attracts the will that, without doubting or being able to doubt, the devout soul follows what is shown to it, as St. Paul and St. Matthew did in the following Christ our Lord”.

This is the situation where you have a well-formed intellect and relationship with God so that He can readily show you the right path. For example, you’re offered a new job, and though it would pay well, it would also devastate your family life and have you working with people of questionable moral character. You don’t even need to spend additional time in prayer – the Spirit leads your well-formed conscience directly to “no”, without any doubt and with much peace.

Second Mode: Preponderance of Prayer and Consolation

St. Ignatius says, “The second time is when sufficient clarity and understanding is received through experience of consolations and desolations, and through experience of discernment of different spirits.”

This is much less an activity of the intellect (though you certainly still think through the situation) and more of prayer and being attentive. Be attentive throughout the day and then prayerfully reflect on your choices. Do you find yourself being led to one option over all others? Is there consolation in that direction? Do you find yourself drawn to this, and is the way being made easier?

Your prayer time should still be focused on the life of Christ in the Gospels. But as you spend time meditating on the Gospels, is God also inclining your heart to a specific choice? Is a specific option accompanied by spiritual consolation – uplifting of heart, a sense of God’s presence, a sense of hope, and so on.

You should keep a log of these daily prayer sessions (and any other relevant daily observations) – to watch for patterns over time.

Third Mode: Preponderance of Reasons

St. Ignatius says, “The third time is one of tranquility, when one considers first for what purpose man is born – that is, to praise God our Lord and save his soul – and, desiring this, chooses as a means to this end some life or state within the bounds of the Church, so that he may be helped in the service of his Lord and the salvation of this soul. I said a “tranquil time,” that is, when the soul is not agitated by different spirits, and uses its natural powers freely and tranquilly.”

This is the situation when the answer isn’t readily obvious (Mode 1) nor does it declare itself with additional prayerful reflection (Mode 2). First, regarding “time of tranquility” – if you find yourself descending into desolation (feeling very far from God, drawn to low and earthly things, no hope for the future, only bad thoughts about the past, etc) – this is not the time for the Third Mode, wait for desolation to pass, as it always does, and then proceed with discernment.

Third Mode, First Way

1. The Question – clearly word what it is you need to decide. For example, not just “I need a job”. Make it as specific as you can: (a) I desire such-and-such job, (b) should I take job #1, (c) should I take job #2, (d) should I continue looking for other job options...
2. The Disposition – you need to approach this discernment with complete trust and obedience and separated from any personal attachments (to money, freedom, your own desires/plans for retirement, etc) – God knows all these things and is taking them all into account. Your disposition must be one of being completely open to His will.
3. The Petition – from St. Ignatius, “ask God our Lord that he be pleased to move my will and place in my soul what I ought to do in this matter before me that would be more for his praise and glory”.
4. The Reasons – in writing, list the spiritual and faith-based advantages and disadvantages of each option. Again – these are spiritual/faith based. How will these options impact your relationship with God? How will they relate to your vocation as husband and father, or wife and mother? And so on. You want to write these down.
5. The Choice – from St. Ignatius, “after I have thought and reasoned in this way about every aspect of the matter before me, I will look to see toward which alternative reason inclines more.”
6. The Confirmation – pray to God to confirm your choice. Is there peace and tranquility with the decision? Do doors start to open?

Note that the Third Mode does not lend itself as readily to open-ended options, such as "should I look for a new job?" In most aspects of life, if we have an open-ended situation, our best action is to proceed as our intellect dictates. In the example of looking for a new job, if our intellect is telling us that it might be necessary to get a new job, we should start to investigate options, which will then lead to specifics that we can bring to discernment.

If this first way does not lead to a clear answer, continue with the following approaches in the 2nd Way:

Third Mode, Second Way

1. 1st Rule : *The Disposition* – this is the same as the disposition for the First Way – and the second way tests us in that disposition - that we are being completely submissive to God's will.
2. 2nd Rule: *A Person I Have Never Seen* – how would I advise a stranger making the same decision? This is very helpful for weeding out attachments, so we can choose objectively (because you don't even know the person), and from the perspective of what is most pleasing to God.
3. 3rd Rule: *When Life is Ending* – consider yourself from the point of your death. This is also very helpful for weeding out attachments, so we can choose objectively, and from the perspective of what is most pleasing to God.
4. 4th Rule: *In Light of Eternity* – going further, consider this choice from the perspective of when you meet God at your final judgement – from the perspective of responding to God that you chose the most loving path through life. And also, eternity is ... *eternal* ... it puts our decisions in this life, which only spans decades, in perspective.
5. The Decision – again, prayerfully make a decision, in the First Way.
6. The Confirmation – again, pray to God to confirm your decision, as in the First Way.