

Day 5: Discernment in Context

In this retreat we've intentionally broken discernment into bite-sized pieces: Ignatius' 3-step paradigm; the *Examen* Prayer; discernment of spirits; and, discerning the will of God.

We need to breakdown concepts and methods as a starting point. But none of this is meant to be a clunky, Frankensteinian affair. In fact, spiritual discernment is a matter of relationship with God. The more we grow in our relationship with God, the more we will grow in our discernment. And so, as you practice these various aspects of discernment, they should become a natural part of your relationship with God.

Discernment and Meditation

Who do you go to when you need advice on a sensitive issue? Often, a good friend. Why? Because you *trust* them. And you know them. You can speak openly with them and easily interpret the nuances of their response.

The same dynamic holds with our relationship with God. If we only talk to Him when we're in a moment of need (as the author had been known to do...), we are missing out on the heart of discernment – which is familiarity with God – knowing and trusting Him – having a *relationship* with Him.

This is why daily meditation is the cornerstone of discernment. Christ tells us, "My sheep know my voice." But it can be very difficult to distinguish an authentic prompting of the Spirit from a troublesome prompting of our own fallen nature or from the enemy himself; we need to speak with Christ daily to confidently know His voice.

What's more, Scripture is the Living Word of God:

Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart. (Heb 4:12)

Whoever is of God hears the words of God. (John 10:27)

And for this reason we too give thanks to God unceasingly, that, in receiving the word of God from hearing us, you received not a human word but, as it truly is, the word of God, which is now at work in you who believe. (1 Thes 2:13)

And since scripture is, in fact, a manifestation of Christ, it is He who becomes a part of us and is thus "at work in us who believe." And that transformation through Christ is the true source of discernment: "Do not conform yourselves to this age but **be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God**, what is good and pleasing and perfect. (Rom 12:2)

Discernment and Time

God so often seems paradoxical to our human minds. God works on his own schedule, to be sure. And God's timetable can be maddeningly different from our own. For God, "one day is like a thousand years..." (2 Pt 3:18) For us humans, one day can *feel* like a thousand years when we're waiting on God. At the same time, God is urgent. When He *does* call on us, He demands a response – "No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God." (Lk 9:62) And think of the disciples looking skyward after Jesus' ascension, only for the angel to question them "Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky?" (Acts 1:11)

And so it is in our spiritual lives. On the one hand we are called to act. We're constantly bombarded by things in the physical and spiritual realms, and we must respond to them. On the other hand – we're called to silence, to listening, to discernment; and that often takes time.

Our perceived urgency of the situation is always secondary to God's sovereignty and His timetable. Here's a maxim you can take to the bank: "Time is a blessing in discernment." This is true in two ways. First, we need to let the discernment process play out without forcing it – it takes the time that it takes. Second, time is the great revealer of truth – after enough time has passed, we look back on our discernment to assess how we did. How faithful were we during the process? And, has time born out our discernment, or, were additional "course corrections" needed afterward?

Discernment and Trust

First and foremost, we love God by letting him love us. "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us first" (1 John 4:10)

Here's the kicker - we can't let God love us if we don't trust Him. And we trust God by letting God be God. We must be small and humble so that he can be large in our life.

And trust is one of those virtues that grows best through tribulation (see Romans 5:3-5). Our faith and trust grow when we prevail over adversity by the grace of God.

Now is always our time to grow in faith and trust in God. Each day brings almost endless opportunities to turn things over to His providence, His plan, His strength. It's so important because so much of what we encounter in this life will remain a mystery to us – such as the balancing of God's permissive and perfect will with our free will – and "God's ways are not our ways" - but our understanding isn't necessary, only our trust.

And that is the heart of discernment; the unwavering trust that desiring God's will, and doing our small part to work toward it is enough. And then we leave the outcomes to Him, who "before birth called us, from our mother's womb gave us our name." (cf. Isaiah 49:1)

Recommended References

St. Ignatius of Loyola – *The Spiritual Exercises*

St. Ignatius of Loyola – *Personal Writings*

Gallagher, Timothy – *The Examen Prayer*

Gallagher, Timothy – *The Discernment of Spirits*

Gallagher, Timothy – *Discerning the Will of God*

Marshall, Taylor – Thomas Aquinas in 50 Pages (for an intro to theology and the human person)

Sheed, F.J. – Map of Life (for an intro to theology and the human person)