



Life is full of decisions: some simple and others that can change the course of our existence. Deciding what to dedicate oneself to, with whom to share life, how to respond to a conflict situation, or what one's purpose in life is are decisions that often require more than rational analysis. In the Christian tradition, this process of deep search and reflection is called "discernment." But what is discernment? Is it just a technique of analysis, or does it have a spiritual dimension that sets it apart? In this article, we will explore discernment as a valuable tool for making decisions aligned with God's will, and we will learn how to apply it in our daily lives.

What Does "Discernment" Mean in the Christian Tradition?

The term "discernment" comes from the Latin *discernere*, meaning "to separate" or "to distinguish." In a spiritual context, discernment is the process of distinguishing between impulses that bring us closer to God and those that lead us away from Him. Saint Ignatius of Loyola, one of the great masters of discernment in the Catholic Church, defined this process as the ability to "distinguish the movements of the spirit," that is, to recognize which inspirations come from God and which do not.

This concept of discernment is not only limited to differentiating between good and evil; it extends to choosing the best path among various good options. In everyday life, many decisions are not presented as a struggle between right and wrong, but as a choice among diverse paths that could each be good. Discernment, then, is key to knowing which of these options best aligns with the plan God has for each of us.

A Brief History and Roots of Discernment in Christianity

Discernment as a spiritual practice has roots in the early Christian communities and the teachings of the Desert Fathers. The Desert Fathers were monks who, in their solitude and contemplation, sought to purify their hearts and listen to the voice of God. Their austere lives and devotion to prayer enabled them to develop a particular sensitivity to the origins of inner movements, a practice that inspired generations of Christians.

Saint Paul mentions the importance of discernment in his letters. In his letter to the Philippians, he exhorts his readers to "examine everything and hold on to what is good" (Philippians 4:8). This phrase captures the essence of what it means to discern: to examine, to test, and ultimately to hold on to what leads us toward goodness.

However, it was with Saint Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century that spiritual discernment was systematized in a way that profoundly impacted Catholic spirituality. Saint Ignatius



developed a method known as the “Spiritual Exercises,” where discernment becomes a central tool for making spiritual and practical decisions. Through his “rules for the discernment of spirits,” Saint Ignatius offers a guide for recognizing inner consolations and desolations, helping us understand when the Holy Spirit is guiding us and when our decisions may be influenced by opposing forces.

Theological Relevance of Discernment: Seeking God’s Will

Discernment has a deeply theological foundation: it is based on the conviction that God has a purpose and a plan for each of us. It is not merely a process of analysis but an act of faith and trust. In discerning, we attempt to align ourselves with God’s will, understanding that He wants the best for us and guides us at every moment of our lives.

From a theological standpoint, discernment is a process of cooperation between human freedom and divine grace. God has given us the gift of free will, but He does not leave us alone in our decisions. Through prayer, listening, and reflection, the Holy Spirit acts within us, providing the clarity we need to choose the right path. This divine accompaniment is what gives discernment its unique spiritual character.

The Discernment Process: Practical Steps to Make Decisions According to God’s Will

1. **Prayer and Silence**

The first step in discernment is creating space for silence and prayer. Amid the noise and rush of today’s world, it is crucial to find moments of calm where we can open ourselves to God’s voice. Dedicate a few minutes each day to pray and ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Prayer is not just a petition but a disposition to listen with humility.

2. **Examine Inner Movements**

During discernment, it is important to pay attention to “inner movements”: thoughts, emotions, desires, and resistances that arise in our hearts. Do you feel peace when thinking about this decision, or are you filled with a sense of unease? According to Saint Ignatius, peace and consolation are signs that a decision may be aligned with God’s will, while desolation and confusion can indicate otherwise.

3. **Reflect on Motivations**

Honestly ask yourself why you want to make a particular decision. Are you doing it out of love for God and others, or are there motivations of selfishness, fear, or pride? Discernment requires sincerity; we cannot deceive ourselves if we wish to know God’s will. The right motivation is often a clear sign that we are on the right path.



4. **Seek Counsel from Wise People**

Sometimes a decision may be difficult to discern on our own. In these cases, it is wise to seek advice from trusted and spiritually experienced people, such as a spiritual director or someone with a deep life of faith. Saint Paul reminds us that “in the multitude of counselors there is wisdom” (Proverbs 11:14). God can speak through those who have an objective and loving perspective toward us.

5. **Make a Decision and Verify it in Practice**

After reflecting, praying, and making a decision, trust that you have done your part. However, it is important to verify the decision in practice. Do you feel peace and coherence in your life with this choice? Does it bring you closer to God and help you live in harmony with others? Inner peace and consistency between our values and actions are clear signs that we are heading in the right direction.

Discernment in Daily Life: Practical Applications

Discernment is not only applied in major decisions; it is a practice that can transform our everyday lives. Here are some examples:

- **Personal Relationships:** We can apply discernment to decide how to respond in conflict situations. Instead of acting impulsively, reflect on whether your words and actions promote peace and reconciliation.
- **Choice of Activities and Priorities:** In our society, time is a valuable resource. Discerning how we use our time —deciding which activities are necessary and which are not— is essential to living a balanced and God-centered life.
- **Professional Decisions:** In the workplace, discernment helps us make ethical decisions and seek a vocation that allows us to serve God and others. The option offering more material benefits is not always the best; sometimes the calling may go in a different direction.
- **Use of Technology and Social Media:** In a world filled with information, discerning what content we consume and share can help us be more aware of what edifies us and what simply distracts us or generates anxiety.

Conclusion

Discernment is not an easy exercise; it is a process that requires time, patience, and a genuine openness to God’s guidance. In a world full of options and pressures, discerning is essential for living with coherence and inner peace. By applying discernment to our decisions, we draw closer to fulfilling the purpose God has for us, allowing our actions to reflect His love and goodness in the world.