

Seeking God's Will: Our Heart's Desire

Ignatius lay bedridden in his family's home. A man of great worldly ambition, he had dreamed of becoming a prominent member of Spanish society. But at the age of 26, his promising military career was shattered by a French cannonball to the leg. Military exploits, gambling, and affairs with women all gave way to weeks staring at the ceiling.

Ignatius asked for some chivalric romance stories to pass the months of his recovery. However, his family had no books of that kind—only *The Life of Christ* and a book on the lives of the saints. Consumed with boredom and without anything else to do, Ignatius read these spiritual works for the first time.

Ignatius also spent hours daydreaming. Often, he would picture an imaginary noble woman, whom he would impress by his gentle words and warlike deeds. But at other times, his thoughts moved in a very different direction. He asked himself, "But what if I should do what St. Francis did?" or "What if I should act like St. Dominic?"

Ignatius' mind continuously passed back and forth over these two possibilities. As he did so, he noticed something. On the one hand, his worldly ambitions gave him great initial pleasure but afterwards would leave him dry and sad. On the other hand, when he imagined a life of sanctity, not only did he find joy during the moment, but also long after.

At first, Ignatius thought little of this difference. But one day "the eyes of his soul were opened."¹ Ignatius came to recognize that these movements of his heart were not random. Rather, they were symptoms of a battle raging in his soul, of two "spirits" fighting for his heart and attention: one of God and one of the devil.

By the time he recovered, Ignatius had made his decision. He began a journey of prayer and penance that would eventually lead him to become a priest and found a religious order, the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits). Indeed, St. Ignatius, as we call him today, became a source of renewal in the Church because he learned how to listen to the voice of God.

Discuss: How did St. Ignatius discover God's Will for his life, and what does his experience teach us about discerning the Will of God?

Discernment: Principle and Foundation

God has an incredible plan for your life. In fact, Scripture tells us that God wants even more for us than what we want for ourselves. His plan for us is better than anything we could dream up on our own (see Eph 3:20). But how do we discover God's amazing plan? How

¹ ¹ *The Autobiography of St. Ignatius*, Edited by J. F. X. O'Connor (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1900), 8.

can we make it a reality in our lives? One crucial thing needed is discernment. Discernment is Christ-centered decision making, a seeking of God's Will and our soul's deepest desires, especially in major decisions like our vocation or career. Literally, the word "discern" means to distinguish. Discernment is about distinguishing the voice of God from other voices.

Discernment begins with the question, "What is God's plan for me?" God created each of us as a unique and unrepeatable person, with a special gift and mission. And as a loving Father, God wants what is *best* for us. He sees all the details of our lives and lovingly helps us to grow and develop into the people He created us to be. God does not impose His Will upon us from the outside. Rather, His Will corresponds to the deepest desires of our hearts. To put our discernment in the proper context, we can begin simply by recalling the ultimate good we were made for.

St. Ignatius speaks beautifully about this in his *Principle and Foundation*: "*Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul. All other things on the face of the earth are created for man to help him fulfill the end for which he is created.*"²

Notice what St. Ignatius is saying. He is writing about the goal of our lives. We are made to "praise, reverence, and serve God" above all else, and by this, save our souls. This is God's plan for our ultimate happiness. As we wrestle with the many different choices we face in life, Ignatius invites us to consider them in light of this final end, recognizing that God's Will is found in what leads us to this ultimate purpose.

Ignatius makes a key second point: Everything else in life—our vocation, our time, our money, our hobbies—is meant to be ordered toward this same goal. Here, Ignatius uncovers a foundational aspect of discernment: freedom. Are we truly free to embrace God's Will? The kind of freedom Ignatius speaks about is primarily *internal* freedom from self-centered attachments to things like wealth, comfort, pleasure or pre-conceived outcomes we think we must have in order to be happy. But it also includes being free *externally* from outside pressure, agendas or manipulation from others. True discernment happens, when our heart, our "hidden center," is free to choose God's Will without being held back by internal attachments or external coercion that limit our freedom to give our full selves to God (CCC 2563).

Discuss: Why is knowing our ultimate purpose necessary for discernment? How internally and externally free are you to discern God's Will in your life?

Good Decisions

² *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, Trans. Anthony Mottola (New York: Doubleday, 1989), p. 47.

If discernment is about Christ-centered decision making and seeking our ultimate good, then, at a minimum, good discernment requires making good choices. The Church offers us three simple considerations for choosing well (see CCC 1750-1754).

First, *are we choosing something good?* If something is evil, like murder, adultery, cheating or stealing, we must reject it and choose differently. Practically, it can also be helpful to recall our ultimate purpose and ask ourselves, “Which path will lead to greater love, holiness, and service?”

Second, *are we choosing it for the right reasons?* If we are volunteering for a big project at our parish, but our primary reason for considering it is to win the approval of the pastor or receive praise from our fellow parishioners, then our discernment will be hindered by our poor intention. It is helpful to ask ourselves, “Why do I want this?” That said, it is common to have mixed motives. In these situations, we can humbly acknowledge that, even though our intentions may not be 100 percent pure, we move forward with the part of us that does sincerely want to do what is good for its own sake.

Third, *how does this choice fit with all the aspects of our unique situation*—our talents, desires, and state in life? Good discernment weighs these concrete circumstances. This especially includes being faithful to our existing commitments. God normally does not call us away from good resolutions, and cold feet about moving forward with a commitment or a desire to escape prior obligations are not typically how the Lord speaks to us.

Discuss: How have you applied these three criteria to your own decision making?

Three Ways of Discernment

St. Ignatius taught three ways we can discern God’s Will. Let’s consider each:

1. Clarity Beyond Doubt: We can call this the *extraordinary* way of discernment. Here, Ignatius teaches that we can discern God’s Will by simply responding to clear instructions. God can make His Will so clear that we don’t need to spend additional time praying and reflecting. Think of the angel Gabriel inviting Mary to become the Mother of God or how Jesus appeared to St. Paul and called him to conversion. St. Zélie Martin, when walking by her future husband, heard God say, “This is the one I have prepared for you.” While God doesn’t usually speak so clearly, sometimes He does.

2. Preponderance of Reasons (Prudence): We can call this the *ordinary* way of discernment. Generally, this is how Christian disciples discern most daily decisions. In this second way, we use our God-given intellect, enlivened by grace, to discern His Will. Ignatius tells us to consider prayerfully the pros and cons of a decision, even writing them down, if necessary.

These pros and cons should be focused upon our ultimate purpose, as discussed above. Then, we can make a judgment based on these reasons. If we are still having trouble, Ignatius gives us two tips. First, he counsels us to imagine what we might say to someone else in our situation. What advice might we give them? Second, He suggests we imagine being at the moment of our death. What would we wish we would have chosen before we die? These considerations can give us clarity about what is truly best for us.

In discernment, our human faculties play an important role. God gave us minds, and He delights in us using them. He wants us to think deeply about our important decisions, and often, we can discover His Will simply by praying for his guidance and exercising prudence as we use our mind to weigh a decision.

3. Attraction of the Heart (Discernment of Spirits): This third way can be employed for significant decisions when we have the luxury of praying and reflecting over a longer period of time. Here, we can discern God's voice by paying attention to "consolation" and "desolation." We see this in Ignatius' own story above. After imagining himself pursuing a worldly life, while he initially felt some excitement, those feelings eventually waned and left him slothful and sad (desolation). And, though he was initially more skeptical of living a holy life, he found that imagining such a pursuit left him with peace (consolation). By being attentive to these subtle movements of the heart, he discovered God's Will.

St. Ignatius developed several rules to guide us in this third way—far too much to cover in this article. Here are just some highlights to consider: When we are progressing in holiness, God will lead us toward His Will through peace and inspiration (consolation). This doesn't mean God's Will won't be challenging—difficulty is not the same as desolation. There will also be times when we don't feel God's closeness, when prayer is hard, and when we want to give up (desolation). In these times, it can be tempting to think that something needs to change. However, that is exactly the enemy's plan. Discouragement is his strategy to get us to abandon our good pursuits. During desolation, instead of giving up or making changes, Ignatius counsels us to stay constant, resist the desolation, and trust in God's grace. Then, we can wait patiently until consolation returns to make our decision.

It is important to note that this third way is not intended to be used for most of the decisions we discern in life. It is usually for substantial life choices and can be effective when we have a long period of time for prayer and reflection. Once we learn about consolation and desolation, it can be tempting to over-analyze every aspect of our internal states to make decisions about everyday matters, but this would be an excessive application. For most daily decisions, it is enough to simply use the ordinary way (option 2).

Discuss: Have you ever used one of these three paths to discern God's Will? Which did you use and why? How might one of these methods apply to your current discernment?

Obstacles and Misconceptions

Even with these three approaches to discerning God's will, we might still run into difficulties. Here are some common obstacles and misconceptions to consider:

Trust vs. Certainty: A man once approached Mother Teresa and asked her to pray for him. She said, "What do you want me to pray for?" He answered, "Clarity." She responded, "I will not do that.... Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of." Instead, she said, "I will pray that you trust God." Often, we want to be certain in our discernment. Though God doesn't always give us absolute certainty, He will give us enough light to step forward with confidence and trust.

Peace vs. Relief: God has a beautiful plan for us, but sometimes His Will can seem so daunting that we can hesitate or shy away from doing the great things to which we are called. When we sense God might be leading us to ask someone out on a date, call the Vocations Director, or give up a comfortable job to serve Christ and His mission, we might feel like *not* doing these things will give us relief, like a weight being lifted off our shoulders. This, however, is not necessarily real peace; it might simply be the feeling of relief that comes from avoiding doing something hard. When we can learn to trust that God's plan always leads to our happiness and move forward in it, despite the fear we experience, we allow Christ to expand our hearts and increase our capacity for doing even greater things in His service in the future.

Mutual Discernment: St. Benedict Joseph Labre was convinced God was calling him to religious life, but he was rejected at every turn: too young, poor health, too extreme. Once, a religious order accepted him—for six weeks—before sending him away. Yet, he finally discovered his unique calling through this rejection. Receiving a "no" here on earth can be how God in heaven reveals His Will for us. In these instances, we experience how discernment can involve more than ourselves. Instead of getting frustrated or trying to force another person's hand, learning to accept an earthly "no" as a sign of God's Will for us in that moment can give us great freedom of heart to pursue what He truly wants for us.

"I Prayed About It": Prayer is essential for hearing God's voice, but there are other key aspects of discernment as well: using our minds, seeking counsel from others, and taking steps forward. This is why prayer alone is not always sufficient and why having "prayed about it" may not be definitive for good discernment. When we fail to consider these other elements of discernment, we can even be tempted to think, "If I only pray harder, then God

will reveal His Will.” But God is not hiding His Will from us like a tyrant forcing us to pray until we have met His standards or crack some secret code to get answers. Instead of feeling like we must always spend hours in prayer to discern well, we can be reassured that our loving Father is guiding us toward His Will in other ways also.

Fear of Trusting God: It is not uncommon to fear God’s plan. Pope Benedict XVI once said,

*If we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to him, are we not afraid that He might take something away from us? Are we not perhaps afraid to give up something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful? Do we not then risk ending up diminished and deprived of our freedom?*³

To these questions, the Pope answers emphatically, “No! If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great.”⁴ Fear is a normal human response to the difficult things we may sense we are called to do, and many people in the Bible experienced fear: Mary, Moses, Joshua, Zechariah, even Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. By acknowledging their fears—while at the same time not letting those fears control them—these holy men and women show us that we can remain faithful to God’s plan for us, even if we experience fear of what it might mean for our lives.

Discuss: Which of these obstacles or misconceptions is most challenging for you and why?

Take Action

As we seek God’s Will, it is also helpful to actively take steps forward. Here are three final tips for good discernment:

Seek Counsel: Good spiritual advisers are often a necessity. A good mentor or spiritual director can make all the difference. We want to choose advisors who are faithful to Christ and His Church and truly want God’s Will for your life.

Take Practical Steps: Discernment requires action. Contacting the vocations director, asking someone on a date, or filling out a job application can be part of the discernment process. You don’t have to be certain God will open these doors before taking some initial steps in a certain direction. Rather, we often need to take some practical steps so that God can reveal His Will through them.

Only You Can Choose: Sometimes, when a discernment is particularly difficult, we might think it would be easier for someone like a priest, friend or spiritual director to tell us what

³ Benedict XVI, Homily at the Mass of Imposition of the Pallium and Conferral of the Fisherman’s Ring for the Beginning of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome, accessed at https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050424_inizio-pontificato.html, November 11, 2025.

⁴ Ibid.

to do. But that would be abdicating our responsibility and shing away from our great dignity to discern for ourselves. When people sought advice from Pope St. John Paul II, he would listen and ask questions to help the person probe the matter more deeply in their heart. And then, he often ended the conversation reminding them that no one else can think for them or choose for them. In the end, he said, “You must decide.”

Discuss: What practical steps do you need to take to pursue God’s Will for your life?