

Discerning God's Will

Deep inside every man is a desire to do something important with his life, to be a hero, and to change the world. The Father has put this desire in your heart and He wants to fulfill that call in you.

A vocation is all about love. It is a life of love in a concrete, particular form that comes from God. Each vocation begins with His love for us. In that love for you He is calling you to a particular form of life. This love involves first His total gift of Himself to you, and then in response your total gift of self to Him.

Listen to His voice in prayer. He is speaking in the depths of your heart right now. He is calling you to do something important with your life. He is calling you to give your life to Him. He is calling you to fulfill your call, your vocation.

Jesus Christ is calling you to holiness and wants to help you get there.

“Be Not Afraid to Love Christ!”

— Pope Benedict XVI

What is discernment?

Discernment is seeking God's will. You were created by our loving Father for a reason, a purpose. God the Father knew who He was creating and why. You have been charged by Him to undertake a mission, entrusted only to you. He is always calling us to our mission, our vocation. We must make it our task to listen to his voice; this is discernment. To find the happiness God created us to experience, we must listen to His voice, discern His voice and embrace our vocation, our mission to serve Him.

Six Steps in Vocation Discernment

Christ our Lord tells us in the Gospel according to St. John, “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (Jn 15:16). His choice for you is what makes a vocation different from an “occupation” or a “career”. You can choose an occupation or a career for yourself, but a vocation (from the Latin *vocare*, “to call”) is HIS choice for you and which He invites you to undertake for love of Him. Often, we are taught to ask, “What do I want to do in the future” or “What life will I choose?” The better way to think is, “What does Jesus want for me?”, “What life will bring Jesus the greatest glory?” and ultimately to say, “I want what Jesus wants. “A vocation is the particular life He has chosen for you, and for which He has specifically created you. He is God and therefore knows which life will best bring about your salvation, your happiness, and His greatest glory. His call will completely fulfill you as a man and a father. A vocation means to be sent by Jesus on a mission to help Him bring His salvation to the world, and so will call for much love, heroism and sacrifice on your part, made possible by the grace of God. The key to discovering your vocation is first to allow Jesus to show His tender love to you. This love will make you capable of loving Him in return.

It is vital to discover one’s vocation precisely because our fulfillment, happiness, and ultimately salvation depend on accepting that plan which God has known from time immemorial.

Below are six steps of vocational discernment. These steps, however, are not merely taken and finished. We are always engaging these steps at deeper levels, even after finding and following our vocation. Sometimes these steps are going on at the same time, and there is always more work we can do at each step.

1) Know that He has Created You for a Specific Mission in this World

The Lord has loved you into being, and even before the moment of your conception has had a plan for your life. God the Father has created you for some specific mission, and wants to reveal it to you.

The Venerable John Henry Cardinal Newman wrote, “God has created me to do him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission... He has not created me for naught. I shall do good, I shall do His work; I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it, if I do but keep His commandments and serve Him in my calling.”

Jesus loves us so much that He invites us to help Him save the world. He alone is the Savior, but He opens up His life to us that we too may share in this work. So the first step in discerning your vocation is to understand that God has created you out of love and in His love invites you to share in His work of salvation.

2) Accept His Love and His Choice for You

Pope John Paul II said that, “every vocation to the priestly ministry is an extraordinary gift of God’s love.” The second step in discerning your vocation is opening up to that love. He told His Apostles and now He is saying to you: “It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you.”

Thus, it is that receiving His love and our vocation are one in the same thing. Because this love is total and complete, without regard to our past mistakes, weaknesses, ignorance and confusion, it is only just that we give everything we can in return.

As the great poet Dante Alighieri wrote, “In his will is our peace.” This is often the step that is most challenging to even the faithful Christian. To say “Yes” to God without condition is to put our lives radically at his disposal. When we say, “Not my will but your will be done,” we are handing over to Him our plans, our ideas, our goals, our very selves. This can be frightening, but it is only in His Will that we will find peace in this life and in the world to come.

His Presence in the Most Blessed Sacrament is a primary way in which we encounter and accept His love and then give ourselves in return. In every Mass, He invites us to unite ourselves to Him in His Sacrifice on Calvary. In the Liturgy of the Word, He cuts us upon with His Word from Holy Scripture which is “sharper than any two-edged sword”, so that He can pour His very self into us. In the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we see the Word become Flesh before our very eyes, and then receive Him into our flesh in Holy Communion. In every Mass, we join our Blessed Lord in His act of sacrificing Himself for the salvation of the world, and receive from the altar His very Body and Blood. The Mass is the primary place where this giving and acceptance of His love happens. To find your vocation, going to Mass faithfully and often is indispensable.

3) Make Yourself Available to Listen to the Lord

Since a vocation is not our will but a calling from God, we must attune ourselves to His Voice so that we can hear His call.

➤ PRAYER

Prayer is how we primarily listen to the Lord’s Voice. Oftentimes we know we should pray, but don’t know how or where to start. If you don’t know how to pray, don’t worry. The Lord longs to be with you in prayer and will help you. He has already helped us through His Church by showing us the primary ingredients to a

life of prayer. The first is liturgical prayer. This is the public prayer of the Church, the greatest expression of which is Holy Mass. All of the Sacraments, like Confession, are liturgical prayer, as well as the Liturgy of the Hours, sometimes called the “Divine Office” and Eucharistic Adoration. We also need to develop habits of personal prayer, especially meditation and contemplation.

Prayer which honors our Blessed Lady is indispensable for finding your vocation. The Church and the saints for centuries have made powerful use of the Rosary, knowing that Mary, the perfect example of following one’s vocation, will lead us to find her Son’s will if we only ask.

Attuning ourselves to the Voice of the Lord also means becoming aware of the obstacles to hearing His Voice. Sin and noise are the two major obstacles which get in the way of hearing His Voice.

➤ **SIN**

Sin is perhaps the most obvious obstacle because it is our willful turning away from God. Thus sin can never be seen as just the breaking of rules. Sin harms and can even destroy our relationship with the God who created us, hung on the Cross for us, and who is calling us to follow Him. In discernment, sin is like mud that gets in our spiritual eyes and ears making us blind and deaf to the Lord.

To answer God’s call-in life, we must be free to say “yes,” which requires freedom from sin. We are not born free nor can we become free on our own. Only Jesus can free us. Through the Cross He conquered sin and death; through His priests He now transmits that saving power in the Sacrament of Confession. We will never know our vocation and be able to respond generously and freely to it without regular Confession. Receiving this great Sacrament at least every two weeks and never less often than once a month will give those who wish to respond to their

vocation the freedom to do so. From this Sacrament comes not only the forgiveness of sins but also a generous outpouring of sanctifying grace into the soul. This sanctifying grace is Jesus' own divine life, which, if allowed to consume your whole being, will show you, His will.

After we have allowed Him to free us from mortal or serious sins, we still have the ongoing work of attachment to venial sin. Attachment to sin is that desire to sin even if we don't follow through on the evil act – wishing we could get away with it. St. Francis de Sales likens attachment to sin as the Israelites in the desert who sometimes longed for the life of Egypt even though it was the place of their slavery. Those attachments, even if they don't spawn sin, keep us back spiritually by preventing our complete gift of self to Jesus and desire to do his will.

➤ **NOISE**

Noise is another obstacle in discernment. We live in a world of noise and are often already immersed in it as we begin the process. Habits of excessively watching television, having idle conversations with others, playing video or computer games and listening to music all the time contribute to the noise around us. Rarely do we have silence, either exterior or interior throughout the day. In fact when we do come into contact with silence it often leads to discomfort and a desire for more noise. St. Ignatius of Loyola, the spiritual master of discernment wrote, “the voice of God, having once fully penetrated the heart, becomes strong as the tempest and loud as the thunder, but before reaching the heart it is as weak as a light breath which scarcely agitates the air. It shrinks from noise, and is silent amid agitation.” Therefore, if you want to know your vocation, begin to develop habits of silence. Limit time spent watching television, playing video and computer games, using the Internet, and listening to music. The only way to do this is to **TURN IT OFF**. While none of these things are evil in themselves, used without the virtue of

moderation they create spiritual static in our hearts and dull our spiritual sensitivity. In addition to eliminating noise, we must foster silence through habits of quiet prayer, reading, especially the works of our spiritual tradition, and just thinking and pondering. Do not fear being alone with your thoughts, for that is where the voice of God can be heard.

4) Cooperate with Him in Clearing Away Obstacles to Free You to Say “Yes”

Even once we know of God’s love and desire for our happiness and have begun to realize His specific will for us it is not uncommon to feel unable or unwilling to give ourselves completely to Him. In order to persevere in following our vocation it is necessary to understand and deal with the things that keep us from giving our entire selves lovingly over to Him.

➤ PAST HURTS

Past hurts can complicate the discernment process. The result of another’s sin against us, they impair our ability to trust and follow the will God, an act demanding of much trust. Often taking the forms of abuse, neglect or absence of a parent or rejection by friends, they not only decrease our ability to trust, but also interfere with the ability to love others and to accept love. We may find forgiveness difficult because we haven’t yet dealt with the just anger, we have about those things, but is absolutely necessary for a complete gift of ourselves to Christ. The strength to do so will come from Him who makes all things new (Rev 21:5). Have confidence in Jesus who comes to free you and make your life new. Find a priest, whom you can trust and open up to, so that he may pray with you and offer counsel. Talking through pain privately with someone trustworthy can bring an enormous amount of healing.

➤ FEAR

Fear inhibits our complete gift of self to Jesus. This fear is not the awe and wonder of holy fear, but rather a crippling fear that comes not from God but from the devil – a state in which it is impossible to discern. The fears can be varied and many: “I hear Him knocking at the door of my heart, and I’m scared to say ‘Yes’ to Him.” “I’m afraid to move away from home and my family.” “Will I be happy as a priest?” “I’ve done too many terrible things to be a priest.” “My parents want grandchildren and they won’t have any if I become a priest.” “What will be left of me if I give myself totally over to Him?” “My friends think I’m crazy for thinking about it.”

Jesus says over and over again, “Be not afraid!” Our beloved Pope John Paul the Great echoed this line frequently, and our Holy Father Pope Benedict has continued it, because it is so needed. We live in a world of fear. St. John tells us, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (1Jn. 4:18). Jesus loves perfectly and Jesus casts out fear; He can put fears to rest. He can do this when together with Him we face them with courage and bring them to prayer.

Dealing with sin, past hurts and fear will free us and purify our love for Him so that His voice can begin to resonate deep within our hearts. It will clear the way to finding your vocation. When you hear His voice and put yourself before His presence you will be in a position to say, “Yes, Lord Jesus. I say ‘Yes’. Be it done unto me according to Your will. Yes Lord, send me.”

5) Give Yourself Entirely to Christ in Love — Be Holy!

The next step then is to respond to Christ’s love with all that we are. We seek to give ourselves entirely to Jesus through a deep, personal relationship. In order to understand the meaning of your life and what you are supposed to do with it this

personal relationship is necessary. Another way of putting it is to ask yourself, “Do I know Jesus, or do I only know about Him?” It is in this relationship with Him as Lord and Redeemer and as His intimate friend where we can hear his call to us.

Loving Jesus means striving after holiness. Our first vocation, the demand for holiness was placed upon us at our Baptism. Holiness means living the life of God here and now. Within this call to holiness emerges the more specific call to a state of life in the Church: priesthood, consecrated life, or marriage. The life of holiness involves prayer (contemplating God), virtue (living God’s life) and asceticism (opening up oneself to God’s life).

➤ **PRAYER**

Prayer is our vital, daily and intimate contact with the Lord. It entails the lifting of our hearts and minds to Him who is with us throughout the day. Prayer is more about listening than speaking to Him, but it involves both. A man who desires to know his vocation must be a man of committed, daily prayer.

A personal relationship is built upon personal prayer. Therefore, you must make time in your day to be with Him exclusively and not just when it is convenient. We make time for friends and important people, and there is no better friend or more important person in the life of a Christian than Jesus Christ himself.

➤ **VIRTUE**

Virtue is a habit of doing that which is good. It comes from the Latin “vir” meaning “man” and conveys true masculinity and strength. Virtue is a habit, that is, not something we do now and again, but regularly and without thought. Living a virtuous life means striving to be in accord with God’s commandments. Our personal relationship with Jesus relies heavily upon our desire to be virtuous men, for he told us, “If you love me, keep my commandments.”

➤ **ASCETICISM**

Asceticism, the practice of making sacrifices for God, makes us more willing receptors of his life within us. Asceticism also sharpens our spiritual senses, which aids in resisting temptation to sin. True love means true sacrifice to another. When a man loves a woman, he is less concerned with his personal desires and wants more to fulfill hers. So too as we grow in our love of God should we seek less to fulfill our desires than His. Sacrifices are not made just for the sake of giving up something out of obedience, but are gifts of self that stem from love. In its most basic sense asceticism means to thwart one's own will in order to embrace the Lord's will – to curb our earthly desires, such as comfort, attention and material goods, so we are free to desire the will of God.

In addition to giving up something, resisting temptation and doing that which we do not desire because it is the will of God is an ascetic act. We do not do ascetical works to earn Jesus' love or grace; we do it to accept more deeply His love and grace that is already offered. Asceticism will help to sharpen our sensitivity to Him and His Voice.

6) Distinguish Between the “Four Voices” of Discernment

In the process of discernment, we should become aware of four voices and need to learn to distinguish them from one. These four voices are the Lord's, our own, the world's, and the devil's. Being attuned to the voice of God, as the previous steps have led us toward, will make the other voices easier to separate. It is not always easy to tell these voices apart from one another, therefore discernment requires time, patience and perseverance in the face of struggle.

➤ **THE VOICE OF THE LORD**

The Lord's Voice is that which is communicating His constant and unfailing love to us. We hear His Voice through Divine Revelation, both in Holy Scripture and in Holy Tradition, and in the Magisterium of His Church, urging us to do that which is good, to trust in Him and to sacrifice out of love. Discouragement and confusion are never the voice of Jesus, which expresses courage and truth as he calls us to a deeper conversion in the face of sin.

With regard to your vocation, be assured that He is calling you, as a man, to one vocation – either the priesthood, consecrated life or marriage. His voice is never deceptive and He will give you the graces to accomplish whatever that particular vocation is. When we are tempted to think that Jesus is calling us to a life that we do not want or cannot accomplish it is not His voice that we are hearing, but that of another.

➤ **THE VOICE OF ONESELF**

Our own voice is expressed in the deep-down desires of the heart. With maturity comes an ordered awareness of these desires and the ability to fulfill them. As a man you are designed by God to desire to be heroic, to change the world for the better, and to love and serve the Lord Jesus with all that you are by loving and serving his creation. Be assured that because it was, He who put those desires in your heart it is He who will allow you to fulfill them. Sometimes, however, our deepest desires are in conflict. Our own sinfulness, that part of ourselves that is still under the dominion of Satan can clamor loudly. Sometimes our voice is in conflict with the Voice of the Lord. Our voice always stands in need of more conversion.

➤ **THE VOICE OF THE WORLD**

The voice of the world is a voice that is under the dominion of the devil, and thus could be considered an extension of his voice. It calls us to put our trust in the things of this world: prestige, money, fame, relationships, importance. It is the voice we hear in advertising, on TV shows, and in much of the music on the radio. The “noise” mentioned before is part of the voice of the world. This voice tempts us to forget about Heaven, our salvation and the Lord’s call in our life. By means of alluring things that appeal to the flesh it drowns out the Voice of Jesus and His love.

➤ **THE VOICE OF THE DEVIL**

The voice of the devil is that voice that is always trying to lead us away from Jesus and to keep us enslaved to him. His voice always tells us to doubt the Lord’s goodness and not to trust in Him. It is the voice that says, “I know more than He does.” It is the voice that tells us to say “no” to Jesus. The most obvious example of the voice of the devil is the temptation to sin, but he can be very cunning, and as St. Paul says can appear as an angel of light. If the devil cannot get us to listen to sin, he then will try to get us to choose something that, while good in itself, is not the good that Jesus wants for us. In other words, the devil’s voice can try to make us choose a less perfect life than that which God has prepared for us.

Be Not Afraid Confusion, frustration and sometimes outright rebellion can be part of the discernment process. Nevertheless, Jesus tells us, “Be not afraid. I am here.” His love can conquer everything, and if we open ourselves to the power of His grace, we will come to find our vocation. Jesus’ desire to tell us is infinitely greater than our desire to know. We need but say with simple hearts, “Jesus, I trust in Thee.”