

1. Stop

First consider this “pre-discernment” checklist:

Is this issue something that can be discerned?

Don't discern:

+ **Immoral things.**

(e.g., “Should I get drunk tonight?” Of course not!) *The discernment is done: don't do it!*

+ **“Everyday” things of no consequence.**

(e.g., “Should I have ‘Fruit Loops’ this morning or ‘Captain Crunch?’”) *Who cares!!! Little daily decisions in the realm of common sense are not discerned.*

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Do discern:

+ **Life-impacting issues:** My major? Grad school? A year of service after graduation? Should I date this person? Do I have a vocation to religious life or priesthood? Should I marry this person?

Don't discern:

+ **Things that are impossible or invalid.**

(e.g., A woman cannot discern to have two husbands at the same time; I cannot discern a job that has not actually been offered to me yet).

+ **Things I have no right to discern.**

(e.g., a married man cannot validly discern whether he should quit his job and serve as a missionary without his wife's knowledge).

Do discern:

+ **A particular question.** (e.g., “Should I join the Peace Corps after college?”)

Though it's a valid intercession, “What should I do God?”, is not a valid discernment question.

Don't discern:

+ **During times of “desolation.”**

Times of *spiritual* darkness or when I am too distracted by other things in life.

If possible, wait for a better time.

Do discern:

+ **In times of consolation or times of peace:**

when I can best hear Jesus' voice.

What are my attitudes?

1. Do I **trust that the Holy Trinity has a plan** for my life? Am I convinced that God's will for me is the best thing for me? Or do I think God is out to get me? (Meditate on Jer 29: 11-15)

2. Am I sufficiently **detached** from the outcome? Really open to God's will or only mine? Can I say: “Thy Will be done?” Am I seeking the “Greater Glory of God?”

Note: Often we don't know our attachments until we enter more fully into the process.

3. Do I **intend to carry out** God's will when he reveals it or will I just do what I want anyway?

4. Am I **free to discern**? Is there anything that stands in my way from discerning God's will or carrying it out?

Sometimes we have postpone discernment even if we know the question.

5. Am I **committed to work through the discernment**? Will I be patient and put in the time?

Discernment is often hard, but it is not impossible.

Do I have enough information?

1. Have I considered a **sufficient range of possibilities** regarding the particular question?

2. Have I **consulted someone** who might know something about the choice I am looking at?

Have I done the best I can to prepare for a decision?

2. Talk

• **To other spiritual people:**

Ask someone *who knows the spiritual life well.*

- Others can help us not get sidetracked by our blind-spots or irrational fears.

- Often friends or families are *not* sufficiently detached from us to give objective input.

Note: Only you can discern God's will for your life! It is between you and him. Be wary of anyone who discerns for you.

*However, others can provide helpful input, help us to focus on the proper questions and point out things we are not able to see ourselves. We should never discern alone! Others are a protection from being misled by the *good things* we can do rather than the *best things* that God desires for us.*

• **To God about:**

1. **Your desires.** They are often a good place to start.

2. **The particular question.** Ask for the Holy Spirit's guidance in this area of discernment. Stay focused on the particular question — don't get sidetracked!

3. **Where your heart is at.** Do you experience spiritual consolation or desolation? (e.g., Filled with: joy, confusion, hope, revulsion, love, fear, peace, etc.).

*Note: On the *natural level* one can be quite in turmoil, but at the deepest levels experience much peace and confidence. (e.g., discerning religious life can often be quite upsetting on the *natural level*, but can be accompanied by peace at the *spiritual level*).*

3. Examine

Use your *mind* to consider the particular question.

- Done at a peaceful time, when free of irrational thoughts and emotional tugs.

Note: Can be the time that attachments are revealed and we can see our feelings in a different light.

The Process

Prayerfully use St. Ignatius of Loyola's three exercises (cf. *Spiritual Exercises* 175-188):

1. Make a chart of the pros and cons for each outcome of the decision. (i.e., Pros and Cons for "No, I should not join the Peace Corps," and then pros and cons for "Yes, I should join.")

2. "What advice would I give to someone else in my exact situation?"

3. Picture each of these scenes:

i. The moment of my death and ask myself: "what would I have wanted to have done."

ii. In the presence of Jesus at the Last Judgment and ask myself: "what would I have wanted to have done?"

Note: St. Ignatius is not trying to be overly morbid! These meditations emphasize the life-long implications of our decisions.

4. Proceed

1. Make a **preliminary decision**.

- Tell someone who knows the spiritual life well about your decision.

- Often it is helpful to "try on" the options and seek confirmation. (e.g., Imagine myself with the outcome. How does it make me feel? Where do my thoughts go? What are my desires?).

2. Make a final decision and tell someone who knows the spiritual life well about your decision.

3. When the time comes, **do what God has shown you with great conviction** trusting in your discernment.

- **Look for closed doors.** Do any insurmountable obstacles arise? Look to refine the question or collect more information if need be. Then return to step 1 if appropriate.

Note: Know the limits of discernment. Remember, all you have discerned is the particular question that you formulated, not the final outcome (e.g., Though you may have discerned a call to enter religious life, it does not mean that you will make perpetual profession of vows).

Therefore, just because you have not carried something discerned to its natural end doesn't necessarily mean that it was a poor discernment. You only discerned the step. God may have only wanted you there for that time and now it's time to formulate another question and repeat the process.

Learning Discerning Step-by-Step

A Brief Guide to Christian Decision Making

*Make known to me your ways, Lord;
teach me your paths.
Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my savior.
For you I wait all the long day.
Psalm 25: 4-5*