Discernment as a Way of Life

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Spiritual discernment is more than a one-time assessment made to reach a major life decision. Mature reflection suggests that “tuning in” to the guidance of the Spirit entails an ongoing reorientation of one’s relationship with Christ. Coming to correct understanding is conditioned by habits of the mind which will steadily turn to hear—and rise to—what the Spirit reveals.

Three Scenarios

Scenario One: The parish council of an urban church is confronted with diminishing finances and increasing needs as the neighborhood changes. One member, a part-time lay student at a local seminary, proposes that they use a discernment model to sort out the confusing situation and search for God’s will for their future. He provides a book that describes a process they can use. After several weeks of trying to work with this model, however, most members of the council feel that confusion and tension are even worse and that no solutions to their original concerns are on the horizon. They end the experiment, expressing great cynicism about the very idea of discernment.

Scenario Two: Julia is 32 years old. Throughout her 20s she rarely went to church or prayed, but recently she has developed a more regular prayer life. Now, she is feeling drawn to give her life in Christian service. Among the many options she thinks about are joining a religious community, going to seminary as a lay person, or becoming a volunteer at a local social service agency. She considers each of these possibilities in turn, but after a few weeks of reflecting on God’s will for her future, she’s still not sure what she should do. She tries to enter into a process of discernment but finds that it is much more challenging than she expected. After several months of trying to figure out her future, she decides that she needs to go back to church and pray more before she can make a decision.

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student, or signing up for an overseas lay volunteer program. She finds a spiritual director with whom to discern and agrees to see her once a month for nine months. At the end of that time Julia believes that her call is to go overseas. A year later, lonely and depressed in a rural area of Thailand, she is certain that the discernment process “didn’t work” and that she has made a huge mistake.

Scenario Three: A religious congregation is gathered in chapter to discern its new leadership. They have been using the same highly structured process for the last several chapters, so most members are comfortable with the routine. However, this time there is a faction that is agitating to throw out the usual process and engage in a different kind of dialogue. The present leadership and the hired facilitators reject this on the grounds that it would not be “discernment.” They manage to retain control of the proceedings, and there are no surprises in the leadership that is chosen. Over the next few years, however, morale in the congregation goes into steady decline, and several members of the “faction” (which included many of the younger members of the congregation) leave the community.

The participants in all three of these scenarios ended up disillusioned with discernment. What else do they have in common? They all approached discernment as a special, method-based, time-limited process. In fact, this is the way a great many Christians understand discernment. More often than not, it is only when an individual or group is face to face with a major decision that they think of discerning. This essay will make the case that one can rarely discern well at the turning points if one has not all along been living a lifestyle grounded in discernment. Discernment must be first of all a “way of life” before it can be a practice for times of special decision-making.

The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola are perhaps the best-known set of practices for discernment. They have helped to guide generations of fervent Christians through vocational and other important discernments. The two sets of “Rules for Discernment” that Ignatius included in the appendices are brilliant summaries of wisdom for how to distinguish between the movements of the Holy Spirit and the effects of other forces. Yet the very predominance of the Exercises has sometimes contributed to the tendency to think of discernment primarily as something an individual does with a spiritual director, during a retreat or an otherwise limited period of time, when a major life decision needs to be made. While drawing appreciatively on what Ignatius has to offer, this essay...
aims to expand our consciousness of when, how, and where discernment fits into our Christian walk.

**Preview of Key Elements**

It is not easy to consistently choose discernment as a way of life, for the cultural, economic, and social systems within which our daily lives unfold do not support it. As Vincent J. Miller has spelled out in trenchant detail in his recent *Consuming Religion*, we live in an era when we are formed from childhood to salve our longings by buying (literally or figuratively) prepackaged solutions from the many on offer. The result is that we tend to treat religious choices in the same way: as a lineup of disconnected options from which we can select, with the assumption that “consumering” what we have chosen will quickly deliver satisfaction. Thus, when we are faced with a spiritual issue and wonder what God might be wanting from us, our first response is likely to be to look around for a package to buy—whether it be a book, a method, some sessions with a spiritual director, or a retreat. To choose, instead, to reorient our whole lives to the learning of discernment demands a deeply countercultural level of choice.

The body of this essay presents three core sets of attitudes and practices that are essential to cultivate if one is to live discernment as a way of life. They are:

1. Following Everybody’s Jesus;
2. Availability for the Specific Invitation of the Spirit;

Just as the Trinity is a flow of life and love among three who are One, living discernment as a way of life involves a continual flow among these three dimensions that make up an integrated Christian spirituality. One can enter the flow at any point, but a serious engagement with it will move one deep into all three. In each of the scenarios described above, discerners failed to engage one or more of these; as a result, their discernment processes were weak and incomplete.

A key idea that will run through the essay is that discernment as a way of life has everything to do with the formation of memory and imagination. Stories and symbols deeply shape the way we interact with the world around us. A commonplace of Scholastic theology was that one cannot love what one does not know. In a more action-oriented postmodern vein, perhaps we could say that one cannot participate in God’s project of love if one cannot imagine how. The outpoured love of God is not known in the abstract; we can discern it only if we bear within our own psyches the images and stories that raise up its possibility within the chaos of life’s particulars.
Of course, the fullness of divine life is far beyond our capability of knowing or imagining; yet the very notion of discernment presumes faith that God has created us with a capacity to understand and participate in what God is about in the world. Perhaps everyone who begins a deliberate discernment process secretly hopes for the “flash of lightning” from God that will definitively settle the issue at hand. Yet even if this occurred, our response would be mediated by how we were able to imagine the meaning of this dazzling revelation. At the same time, such an event would be deeply impressed on memory, and in this way would itself shape the capability of imagining that we bring to future occasions of discernment. Thus, this essay will explore how discernment depends on both the lifelong formation of memory and its availability for being reshaped through the power of unique revelatory moments.

Following Everybody’s Jesus

Christian discernment always revolves around Jesus, who is the epicenter of Christian revelation. Discernment as a way of life begins with getting to know this person who belongs, not just to any of us as an individual, but to everybody. An insight that appears in almost all classical treatments of discernment is that to discern well, one must be humble. One aspect of this is accepting that before expecting God to speak to us uniquely, we must first look for God’s guidance through the teachings of our tradition and the ordinary relationships and responsibilities of our state in life. This language may sound a bit quaint, but the advice is still basically valid. The fact that Jesus has given himself to “everybody” means that a great deal of the wisdom of the Spirit has passed into a common stock that everyone can draw on.

Discernment as a way of life means commitment to these “ordinary” aspects of the call to discipleship, as a foundation for being prepared to respond to what is more out of the ordinary. The Spirit will ultimately mediate this knowledge, for as Paul wrote in First Corinthians, “We have the mind of Christ!” (1 Cor 2:16). Yet we will not have the balanced wisdom to recognize the valid movement of the Spirit unless we also know Jesus well through the other, more concrete forms in which knowledge of him comes to us—namely, Scripture and the ongoing life of Christian communities.

A common mistake is to think of discernment as almost entirely an individual and interior process. Rather, the norm of Christian discernment is communal, for this is normatively where “everybody’s Jesus” is found. As Matthew’s Jesus puts it, “Where two or three are gathered, there am I also” (Matthew 18:20). Jesus’ mission was to bring the Good News to all humanity, and the Spirit’s ongoing work is to form the community that will continue that mission. At bottom, this is always what we are trying to discern: How are we being invited, here and now, to
share in this mission of building up the community of God’s people and pro-
claiming the Good News? Thus, discernment of the Spirit of Jesus takes place in
community and for community.

The minimum presence of Christian community for discernment is dialogue
with a spiritual director. Yet there is risk of some distortion if this is the only
form of community within which discernment takes place. People sometimes
use spiritual direction as a kind of oasis that is carefully maintained in a com-
partment separate from other relationships and activities. Also, the spiritual
direction relationship typically is not mutual, but is focused on the needs and
concerns of the directee only. This protected and inward-focused character of
spiritual direction gives it its unique value for discernment, as a space where
especially deep listening can take place. Yet discerning the movement of the Spirit also requires
other kinds of listening and interacting.

The ideal place to come to know Jesus and to
discern his Spirit is in a community that shares
life and faith on a regular basis, where individ-
uals know one another well and care deeply
about one another’s spiritual journeys, yet at the
same time are free enough not to try to impose
their own desires or expectations upon one
another. Clearly, this is an ideal that is rarely
experienced in its fullness! Moreover, it may be
unrealistic to expect to find all that we need for
discernment in any one set of relationships. Still,
if we are serious about becoming discerning
people, we will be wise to broaden our networks
and be on the lookout for individuals and groups with whom we can commit to
building this level of shared life.

The preeminent memory book of the community centered on Jesus is, of
course, the Bible. Scripture is not a historical record per se, but a compilation of
various community testimonies to core events and meanings in a millenniums-
long walk with God. As we read and pray with Scripture, our imagination is
shaped by the symbols and stories that have emerged from hundreds of individual
and group encounters with God. This is utterly essential formation for a life
of discernment. As Luke Timothy Johnson puts it, “We cannot recognize the action
of God in the present as God’s action unless we have some knowledge of God’s
work in the past” (Johnson, 25).

In fact, often it is in the very act of meditating on a Scripture passage that we
are awakened to Spirit-filled insight into a present dilemma. The recorded story
of God’s life in the community of the past becomes a frame through which our
ability to imagine and receive that life afresh is configured. Yet it is poor planning

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to wait to engage in this kind of meditation until the day when we are desperate for such an enlightenment. The frequent practice of reflecting on Scripture, sometimes in solitude, sometimes in faith-sharing with others, and regularly in communal liturgy, is the best remote preparation for occasions of more intensive discernment.

The particular gift of the Ignatian Exercises is their ability to form our imagination in the following of Jesus. Retreatants are led through a structured series of exercises that meditate on Jesus’ healing love, his passion and death, his resurrection, and his ongoing mission. Ignatius teaches a powerful mode of employing the imagination to place oneself as a participant in the Gospel stories, and to picture oneself at the crossroads of the choice to follow Jesus. Engaging in a retreat based on the Exercises is an excellent way to practice this kind of meditation. It may also be an occasion to enter intensively into a specific discernment process, and perhaps to come to new clarity about where the invitation of Jesus’ Spirit is moving in one’s life. Yet, as indicated above, it would be problematic to engage in such a practice as something in a separate compartment from the rest of one’s life. The point of imagining one’s way into the Gospel stories is to be formed as Jesus’ disciple, and discipleship is a lifelong, “24–7” commitment.

Availability for the Specific Invitation of the Spirit

The previous section focused on the aspect of following Jesus that is lifelong, everyday, and “common.” This section looks at the other side: the ways in which the disciple must be open to unexpected or unusual movements of the Spirit. These two modes (as well as the third one) are not necessarily sequential; rather, they are different facets of an organic process of growth in a discerning life. Once again, our focus is as much on how one prepares and makes oneself capable of such a deep openness, as on the element of grace that no one can prepare or control.

The issue at hand here is a deeper intimacy with God; and we cannot be intimate with God, who dwells within us, unless we have grown into a deep level of intimacy with ourselves. Like intimacy with another person, this demands attentiveness in the midst of the daily grind as well as in the special moments of intensity. A habit of noticing and gently reflecting on one’s emotional, mental, and behavioral reactions to whatever is happening around one may be one of the most essential practices for growing in discernment.

In his Autobiography, Ignatius of Loyola described how he was first awakened to insight into the subtle movements of the Holy Spirit by paying attention to the different trajectories of fantasies and feelings that followed when he read novels.
of chivalry or lives of the saints (Autobiography, 22–25). The practice of the “examen,” in which one regularly takes time to review the feelings and responses stirred by the day’s events, is designed to foster this kind of sensitivity to the movement of the Spirit (Ignatius, Exercises, #24–26). While daily examen is usually an individual practice, something similar can be done in group settings at more widely spaced intervals.

The intimacy that God desires to share with us often seems subtle or hidden from our point of view. Yet most people can name a few life events when they had a transient but uniquely potent awareness of love, light, unity, tenderness: a kind of transcendent “falling in love” that stands in memory as a permanent beacon of the hope that love and goodness really are the bottom line of who one is. The birth of a child, a walk in spring, a phrase read, a chance encounter with a hurting person—anything might be the catalyst of such a moment. In her Dialogue, Catherine of Siena offers a profound image for how this relates to self-knowledge and discernment. She presents God as speaking to her, saying:

So think of the soul as a tree made for love and living only by my love. . . .
The circle in which this tree’s root, the soul’s love, must grow is true knowledge of herself, knowledge that is joined to me, who like the circle have neither beginning nor end. . . . This knowledge of yourself, and of me within yourself, is grounded in the soil of true humility. . . . So the tree of charity is nurtured in humility and branches out in true discernment (Dialog #10).

As Catherine points out, true self-knowledge is to know one’s very being as rooted and grounded in God’s love. Since at this level God, in Godself, is always united with us (even when we are oblivious or rejecting of that union), this kind of awareness potentially can break through even in completely unexpected times or places. A key exercise for growing in self-knowledge is to remember and ponder those occasions where God’s love embraced us most powerfully. Such moments can transform a person’s sense of what their life is really about and spark a new fire to find a way to live it out. As one goes about living this new direction in life, one continues to draw energy and hope from the memory of the touchstone event.

This whole process is crucial for the development of our ability to recognize when God is again moving authentically in our lives. God relates to us with total fidelity, so insofar as the past realization of who we are in that relationship was authentic, each new occasion of God’s invitation will be in continuity with it. At the same time, each “now” moment of God’s breakthrough is also redolent with the passion of a new falling in love, bringing a new perspective and the need to reclaim and reinterpret all that has gone before. As we move through life telling and retelling the story of that God-relationship, both to ourselves and to others, our knowledge of ourselves and of God deepen together.
Yet every faith-journey also encompasses times when neither a formed
imagination nor remembrance of God’s special touches suffices to prevent
an unnerving sense of confusion about where God is in it all. The journey of self-
knowledge has its high points of discovering that we are made for love, but it
also has its low points of discovering the nastier potentials of our human nature.
For most of us, much of this works its way out in the crucible of human rela-
tionships. Whether in marriage, parenthood, religious community, or work,
human relationships bring a combination of pleasures and stresses. Wanted or
not, there is daily feedback from others about our imperfections as well as our
gifts. Receiving and pondering this feedback require an even more demanding level of humility.
At the same time, learning to accept, love, and
forgive others when they annoy or even hurt us begins to exercise us in another level of faith.

Even more challenging than difficult relations-
ships or personal failures are calamitous events
that occur without warning and result in terrible
suffering or diminishment. Accidents, wars,
natural disasters, criminal acts: these utterly in-
explicable catastrophes can shatter a person’s
settled worldview and shake faith to the roots.
On the day after Christmas in 2004, a tsunami swept almost 200,000 people to their deaths and
destroyed the families, homes, lands, and hopes
of millions more. How does one discern God’s
presence in the face of such horrors? On the
theological level, this is a classic question for
themody—that is, for theologies explaining why
God allows (or, in some versions, even intends)
so much suffering and destruction. But on the personal level, such occurrences
(or their less public equivalents within our own small life-worlds) are the ultimate challenge to living discernment as a way of life.

In The Love of God, Francis de Sales distinguished between discerning God’s
“declared will,” which may be known through the commandments and evangeli-
cals as well as through special inspirations of the Holy Spirit, and discerning God’s “permissive will” (de Sales, Books VIII and IX). The first two
sections of this essay dealt with what de Sales called God’s “declared will”—that is, what God positively desires for us and invites us to choose freely. This section,
however, deals with finding God in what neither God nor we ourselves desire at
all—namely, unbearable suffering, absurdity, broken dreams, tragic death. De Sales
noted that a major difference is that God’s declared will is like an invitation to
dinner, which we can politely accept or refuse; but when earthquake, accident,
violent attack, or major illness happen, we don’t have a choice about our life
being turned upside down (de Sales, Book VIII, ch. 3; Book IX, ch. 14).

Many today would quibble with de Sales’ theodicy, which implies that God is
behind such horrors even to the degree of “permitting” them. However, his real
focus is not on how the shocking events came about, but on how we are to live
into the certainty that God is with us in them. As I read it, de Sales is not saying
that God is indifferent to terrible events, or, worse, that God intentionally sends
them our way. Rather, God’s compassion and forgiveness are so all-encompassing
that there is no possible catastrophe—whether human-caused or sheerly natural
—that will not be embraced with utmost love
and, in some way beyond our ken, woven into
the merciful plans of God’s heart.

These are the kinds of events that one can do
little or nothing to make immediate preparation
for, since they crash in upon us without warn-
ing. Yet living discernment as a way of life does
offer us an approach to remote preparation. In
ordinary life there are many occasions when our
plans, hopes, and desires are overturned in small
ways. There are also illnesses, accidents, and
quarrels that do not reach the level of catastrophe
but nonetheless perturb us considerably. These
are opportunities to practice the radical faith
that will be required when disaster strikes. Re-
actions of grief and anger are natural, yet stay-
ing in that mode will only create vicious circles
that lead ultimately to more hurt and destruc-
tion. A pause to ponder the infinity of God’s
mercy that can compassionately embrace both
our sorrow and the aggression of whatever or
whoever has hurt us is a way to begin to cocreate
with God a heart-center of peace in the midst of any level of chaos.

This practice brings us, in a way, full circle. Once again we are following
“everybody’s Jesus” whose earthly life ended on an instrument of torture. This
time, however, our following has moved from the level of forming our imagina-
tion to that of walking our own path of blood and tears. Fidelity to this path will
lead us, moreover, to yet another level: namely, the blossoming of lived sister-
and brotherhood with those whose spirits and bodies are broken daily by the
crucifying effects of poverty, environmental degradation, and political exclusion.
Radical faith in the God who raises the crucified will, ultimately, teach us that the

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“preferential option for the poor” is not simply another consumer option that sits side by side with many others on a full shelf of possibilities. On the cross, Jesus poured out his blood and his Spirit. Still today, God’s Spirit is being poured out wherever the cross is planted—in our own lives, and in the world. In discovering this for ourselves, we learn the most fundamental principle of discernment as a way of life.

**Conclusion**

This schema of three aspects of discernment as a way of life is, in a way, a new version of the classic threefold way of purgation, illumination, and union. “Following everybody’s Jesus” involves the hard, purgative work of letting go of one’s egoistic plans for one’s own aggrandizement and being formed in the ways of Jesus. “Availability for the specific invitation of the Spirit” requires the freedom and self-knowledge to open up to God’s illumination on an intimate level. “Radical faith in the God who raises the crucified” focuses on a kind of union that excludes nothing, not even catastrophe and death. Discernment, in this view, is not so much a practice as the foundation of a whole spirituality.

Given that few of us are very far advanced in living this spirituality in its fullness, what might help those described in our initial scenarios to make some progress? The parish council (Scenario One) would have a far better experience of communal discernment if they began with a long-term commitment to formation of heart and mind in “Following everybody’s Jesus.” Only then will they be able to distinguish the movement of the Spirit when it comes—and deal maturely with the elements of confusion and uncertainty that are an inevitable part of group life in a time of transition.

In order to come to terms with her present situation of discouragement, Julia (Scenario Two) needs especially to seek “Radical faith in the God who raises the crucified.” Her challenge is to stop second-guessing her original discernment and instead discover God in the painful here and now. The exercises of imagination and memory described in relation to the first two modes may be of help to her. Even more crucial, however, will be the support of a community that is steadfast in discerning faith, even when she sees only darkness.

The religious congregation (Scenario Three) is unlikely to grow in vitality without serious attention to “Availability to the specific invitation of the Spirit.” Hopefully, the group will find ways to refresh imagination and rekindle the energy of daily discipleship. Yet the reality of diminishment must also be faced; they too will need to go to the depths of radical faith.

As these brief reviews of the scenarios have indicated, the three aspects of discernment are woven together in a kind of trinitarian mutuality, so that they can ultimately only be engaged as a whole. There is, finally, no “quick fix” for
knowing the way of God in one’s life; for the way is simply wholehearted commitment to the journey, moment by moment, day by day, year by year.

References


