

6 Principles of Discernment

from Msgr. Charles Pope

These principles are most often applicable when discerning a course of action, but many can also be applied in determining whether the promptings and urges we sense in our walk with God are truly from Him or just from us. These principles should not be read as absolutes (except perhaps for the first one - when connected to vocation - and the last one). They admit of limits and distinctions. They are merely principles to guide further reflection.

1. State in life

There are many different states in life, some temporary, some long-lasting, and some permanent. We may be single, married, a priest, or a religious. We may be young or old, healthy or frail. We may be a student, a parent, a worker, a boss. We may be rich or poor. Being clear about our state in life can help us discern if a call is from God or not. A priest is not going to hear from God that he should leave the priesthood and marry the woman in the front pew. A feeble, elderly man is not going to hear a call from God to walk the 500 mile El Camino de Santiago in Spain. Calls that seem to be in keeping with one's state in life are something to remain open to.

2. Gifts / Talents / Charisms

People have different combinations of virtues, talents, gifts, charisms and skills. In discerning the will of God regarding a course of action or accepting an offer/opportunity, we ought to carefully ponder whether it makes good sense based on our skills and talents. In this stage of discernment, we should ask, "Is what I am being asked to do, am considering doing, or want to do, a good match for the gifts, talents and charisms God has given me? Does it make sense based on what I am equipped to do?" God does sometimes want us to try new things and discover new abilities, but it is more typical that He will ask of us things that he has already equipped us to do.

We are looking into possibly exploring charism discernment for our group as well. That being said, I know some of you are chomping at the bit to start exploring that a bit more :) A great book for reading and understanding charisms and their relationship to gifts & talents is [Fruitful Discipleship](#).

3. Desire

When it comes to deciding among various courses of action that are each good (e.g., marriage and the priesthood), feelings and desires do matter and may help to indicate God's will. When God wants us to move in a particular direction, He often inspires in us some level of desire for it. He leads us to appreciate that what He wants for us is good, attractive, and desirable.

Learning to listen to our heart is an important method of discernment. For example, a good activity might be proposed for us to do but we feel no joy or desire to do it. Such feelings should not necessarily be dismissed as mere selfishness or laziness. It is possible that our lack of desire is a sign that it is not God's will. On the other hand, we might experience a joy and zeal to do even things that are challenging; such desires can help us to discern that God has prepared us and wills for us to do that very thing. Hence desire is an important indicator in deciding between courses of action that are good. Ultimately God's will for us gives joy.

Note: That desire can be a principle of discernment is a surprise to some people. We are often suspicious of our desires—and not without reason. When it comes to most things in the realm of moral law and doctrine, our desires and feelings are largely irrelevant and should not be used to discern God's will. For example, that we should not commit adultery remains the clear will of God no matter how much we might desire it. That Jesus is God is true no matter how we feel.

4. Organic development

This principle simply articulates that God most often moves us in stages rather than in sudden, dramatic ways. Although there are times of dramatic change, loss, and gain in the life of most people, it is more typical for God to lead us gently and in stages toward what He wills for us.

In discernment it is valuable to ask, “Does this seem to build on what God has generally been doing in my life? Is there some continuity at work if I move in this direction? Does progressing into the future in this particular way make sense based on how and where God has led me thus far?”

It is generally a good idea to exercise caution about “biggie-wow” projects and “out-of-the-blue” rapid changes. It is better to ask, “What is the best “next step” in my life?” While sometimes “life comes at you fast,” God more often works through slow, steady, incremental growth, and asks us to be open to changes that make sense for us as the best “next step.”

5. Serenity

When God leads us, the usual result is serenity and joy. Beneath the turmoil of weighing difficult decisions, we must listen carefully for a deeper serenity that signals God’s will.

If serenity is wholly lacking, if there are no consolations but only desolation, we should carefully consider the possibility that the proposed course of action is not God’s will. Amid the stress that often surrounds making important decisions, being able to sense serenity is more difficult; hence, we ought not to jump to the conclusion that serenity is lacking. Sometimes we must wait a while to sense serenity’s still, small voice. When it is present we have an important indicator that this is God’s will.

6. Conformity to Scripture and Tradition

Some may think that this principle should be at the top of the list and you are free to put it there, but I prefer to say that the Word of God and the teachings of the Church have the last word in any decision. One may go through the first five principles and feel quite certain of a particular course of action, but the final and most important step is to be sure that our insight or conclusion squares with the Lord’s stated revelation in Scripture and Church Teaching. God’s revelation in Scripture and Tradition trumps every other principle of discernment.

Read more: <http://blog.adw.org/2018/01/six-principles-discernment/>

Additional Discernment Resources:

- [Authenticity: A Biblical Theology of Discernment](#) (by Fr. Thomas Dubay).
- [The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide for Everyday Living](#) (by Timothy M. Gallagher O.M.V.)
- [Spiritual Consolation: An Ignatian Guide for Greater Discernment](#) (by Timothy M. Gallagher O.M.V.)
- Fr. Gallagher also has two podcasts on this topic:
 - [Discerning Hearts Podcast: Discernment of God's Will](#)
 - [Discerning Hearts Podcast: Discernment of Spirits](#)
- [Fruitful Discipleship: Living the Mission of Jesus in the Church and the World](#) (by Sherry Weddell)
 - This book is really the best out there right now on Charisms.