

## **“Vocational Discernment”**

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I think, for true discernment, it is important to point out, right at the beginning that God loves you. He wants the optimal good for you. He wants what is best for you; he made you; “He knitted you in your mother’s womb;”<sup>1</sup> he knows how you are made; And he has a plan for you and ultimately, his plan for you is what is going to make you most happy. That doesn’t mean that it isn’t going to be hard, and that you aren’t going to have bad days, but if you follow the call God has for you, you will be most fulfilled and most happy. Be not afraid!

I’ve decided to start out with a reading from Scripture which in some way expresses an important aspect of discernment. This reading is from the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of the first book of Kings we hear the story of Elijah. His life is being threatened by Jezebel because of his zeal for the Lord. He was responsible for the death of the false prophets – he is fleeing for his life, and he doesn’t know what to do, he is *discerning* what to do.

A reading from 1 Kings 19:3-13:

[Elijah] was afraid, and he arose and went for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a broom tree; and he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life; for I am no better than my fathers." And he lay down and slept under a broom tree; and behold, an angel touched him, and said to him, "Arise and eat." And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank, and lay down again. And the angel of the LORD came again a second time, and touched him, and said, "Arise and eat, else the journey will be too great for you." And he arose, and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. And there he came to a cave, and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Psalm 139

even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

And he said, "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD." And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

I think this reading from scripture is instructive for us on the topic of discernment. Discernment in our context here signifies the process of distinguishing one thing or idea from another. To discern is derived from the Latin word *Discernere* – to separate things according to their qualities, to distinguish one thing from another, and in this context, to identify one spiritual reality as different from another.

It is like the ancient money changers who had to discern between the coins that come to them. They need to weigh it, check to see if it is really made of gold, and not just gold covered led. They need to be able to recognize the face depicted on the coin and see that it is correct.

We can look at our reading from kings. We have the moment where Elijah is waiting for the lord, and he sees the wind, the earthquake, the fire, but the Lord is not in these. Finally, there is the still small voice, and it only then that he hides his face in his mantle – he recognizes the Lord in the still small voice. He was able to discern, distinguish, among these ‘voices’ and discover the Lord’s voice among them.

For our purposes, here, we are most interested in here is discernment of a vocation. But the same tools for discernment can be used in other areas in your life as well. However, we recognized that it is not always an easy thing. In trying to discern the will of God in one’s life, I think there are two extremes: One is that discernment is merely something which we work at and can acquire on our own; (if I just work hard enough, I will be able to do it). The other extreme would be that it is a gift from God and there is nothing we can do to get it, God just bestows it on us – (i.e. One might say, “Well if God wants to give me discernment, that up to him and I’m not going to worry about it.”) I would argue that it is, in a sense both. It is indeed a gift but it is a gift that we need to dispose our selves to.

In order to be disposed to this gift of discernment we need to actively seek and work toward it, so I think that the normal way God works is through prayer. So I was very pleased when I learned that

the theme for this week was “Doce nos Orare” – i.e. Teach us to Pray. We need to be men of prayer if we are going to discern the will of God in our lives.

Our culture is filled with so many things to distract us, or to give us some means of escape. Our culture is really an escapist culture. Billboards, TV, movies, books, and video games. There are many ways at our disposal to escape. One of the more prevalent, I think, is the T.V. or cable. When we are watching TV our minds are very passive, our mind isn't doing much of anything, just letting the images come and lead us wherever they are going. Another possible escape, especially for young men of your age, heck, even for guys my age, is video games.

Now, am I suggesting that these things are bad and that you should give up your TV set and video games? No what I am saying is that we need to have some time set aside. We need to have time away from all the distractions, all the escapes. To embrace reality, the most real reality. . . to be with God, to listen to his voice. And if we are not used to doing this it will be difficult at first. But prayer is like anything else, you need to work at it to get better at it.

It is like our story of Elijah, our world and the devil for that matter are like the raging wind, the fire, the earthquake... they are flashy, explosive, loud, anything to get our attention.

But where did Elijah hear God? He found God in that still small voice. How did Elijah recognize God in it.

The website points out prayer, the Sacraments, virtue, and asceticism. All of these things, I think dispose us, make us available, to the gift of knowing God's will in our lives; in other words, to discernment.

Our story of Elijah fits in well here. We have the angel coming to him and giving him the cakes and water. It is clear that these are not ordinary food and water because he travels for 40 days and 40 nights on the strength of these. These could represent the sacraments which strengthen us for the journey.

So what is it that we are trying to discern? We have these many voices that are vying for our attention. But they can be condensed, ultimately, down to three voices. There are three voices which we need to be aware of when we are discerning. The first is the voice of the God, the second is our own voice, the third is the voice of the devil. The website gives a fourth voice of which to be aware, and that is the voice of the world; however, I'm going to just group the devil and the world together, because, basically, both of these voices try to distract us from the voice of God.

I'm going to give you a little memory device to remember these three parts of discernment. Have any of you heard those old car horns, you know like the ones they used on the old model A's and model T's. AAAAUUUAAAHH!

Well that is your memory device, that sound that the horn makes: AAAUUUAAAHH. Or, in other words, the acronym A.U.A.

1. Awareness – be aware.
2. Understanding –
3. Action –

AWARENESS is to make an effort to know what is happening in our inner lives, within our inner spiritual experience, what are the movements, what is stirring in our thoughts and our hearts.

UNDERSTANDING – this means reflecting on those stirrings in our hearts.. we look at what in them is of God and what is not.

ACTION – That is to accept and live according to what we have recognized as of God and rejecting what we have recognized is not of God.

I'm going to give an example from my own life. At the time this happened, I was working for Hollywood Video. I was getting to a point where I needed to make a decision. First of all, I'd like to say that I was going to daily Mass at this time, I was making efforts to pray more, I was trying live a virtuous life. And I was actively trying to figure out what God's plan was for me. Anyway, to continue with the example, I was putting movies away on the shelf and I felt a stirring in my heart. Basically the question came to me, "Is this all there is for me in my life?" I didn't really follow these step consciously, but they were there, and there was something going on inside of me. I was AWARE of a dissatisfaction within my heart... I was AWARE of a longing for something more. The way my life was heading seemed to be in two directions, one was pretty specific the other was more open. The specific version was this: I could continue to working at Hollywood video; because my boss liked me and knew that I was a good worker, but (on the other hand) I really wasn't making a living wage, but I could go into management at the store and start trying to climb the corporate ladder. I was sure that I would get support from the manager of the store. And besides, I enjoyed the job well enough. At some point (I figured) I could find the woman of my dreams and get married and have a family.

The other option, which was not quite as clear was that I could explore the possible vocation to the priesthood, perhaps diocesan or religious. I began to weigh the options. I began to try to UNDERSTAND what was going on inside of me. I began to try to UNDERSTAND where God was leading me. I tried to look ahead to the future. The one future seemed pleasant enough, the idea of having a

wife and raising a family, working to sustain the family, continuing to go to church and raising the family catholic.

The other was looking ahead to imagine the life of the priest, distributing the sacrament, being the father of a community of faith, visiting the sick, prayer.

Both of these images had appeal, but the first left me feeling unfulfilled, desolate. The second gave me a sense of consolation. What we are looking for, specifically, is *spiritual* discernment. This, I think, is a discernment that affects our Faith, Hope, and Love.

Lastly, ACTION, I recognized the movement within me, and I understood that my desire for priesthood was from God, This particular project filled me with greater hope, faith, and love. This possible project for life made me hope for the after life. It instilled a longing in me to do the works of God. As I thought about this project for my life and worked toward it, my life of faith increased. It entered into my prayer and I had greater desire to serve. The Scriptures seemed to be calling me to a more radical life style. While the other possible project had a certain appeal (working and raising a family) it didn't seem to be where my heart of hearts was being directed.

So it was time to take ACTION, I began to go to a spiritual director. I began looking around for where it seemed that God was calling me. I looked into a couple of religious orders, and later I called the vocation director and I began to enquire into the priesthood.

With this example from my own life, it may seem like there was this one time event that set everything in motion. No that is not the case; Discernment tends to be a journey. It is a series of little steps in which God guides us -- is a process: It is not just a one time event. It is lots of little nudges and pushes and inspirations.

I've found in my life that after having that AWARENESS, and then UNDERSTANDING, it is important to take those ACTIVE steps to inquire into those promptings of the Spirit. This might be a somewhat lousy example but it illustrates the point. One might feel an inspiration from God that they are going to win the lottery. But if you don't go out and buy the ticket, you are never going to win.

Discerning is simultaneously a process of discernment and growth in the spiritual life. If you are worse off spiritually from pursuing a vocation than you were before you started, that could be an indicator that you are not headed the right direction. I would just like to add one last thing about discernment. Sometimes God may lead us in one direction because he wants us to learn something or to have an experience of something, but that doesn't mean that he necessarily will go the end that that direction points us. What do I mean? It is possible, that God might call one to pursue the

priesthood and even enter the seminary, but not actually go on to become a priest. One must always be discerning.

#### Conclusion:

Time for prayer is important – time to hear that still small voice of the lord speaking in you. Also it is important to find a spiritual director to help you discern, someone who has walked the way before you and to walk with you. A spiritual director can help you avoid pitfall and help you to progress more quickly. We can look at Elijah as a guide for discernment – he ate the food provided by angels (Eucharist, Sacraments) – he prayed to God from his heart – he waited and listened for the voice of God, discerning between the many voices vying for his attention and, finally, he heard that still small voice of God. And he followed it. And while, it was not always easy, deep down he knew that he had really lived; he had done what the Lord had called him to, what he was born for, and in that he found the joy and happiness that only comes from God. God Bless you.

Rev. Ronald Nelson