

How to Discern the Elements of Your Personal Vocation

Personal vocation is God's call to each person to live the unique life of good deeds that God has prepared for him or her. Personal vocation cannot be reduced to vocation as one's state in life, but rather includes it and is relevant for every free choice one makes. This article is about how to discern the elements of one's personal vocation. However, before we discuss that directly, we must carefully consider certain matters that are logically prior to the process of discernment – points to bear in mind that help put one in a position to discern it properly.

I. Points to Bear in Mind when Preparing to Discern

One must recognize first of all that discernment is possible only among morally acceptable options. To discern is to discover which one, among the various options God might want one to choose, he actually does want one to choose. One should begin by eliminating all of the options that God could not possibly want. The most obvious options to eliminate are those that involve doing what is intrinsically wrong, but one also should eliminate options that are good in themselves but that one cannot choose without failing to meet one's responsibilities. This point is of special significance because, as we shall see later, in discerning one takes stock of one's affective response to various possibilities: emotion plays its part, and it can do so properly only if reason has already played its part by eliminating the immoral, or unreasonable, options.

Sincere discernment infallibly succeeds

One also must be convinced that it is possible to discern one's personal vocation. Obviously, no rational person sets out to do what he is convinced is impossible; so, if we wish to encourage people to discern their personal vocations, we need to make it clear that discernment is possible. But is it? We know God is not indifferent about whether our choices are morally good or bad: he wants us to choose what is morally good. Is he indifferent about which of the morally good options we choose? If he is, then discernment is impossible. We obviously cannot discover which option, within the range of morally good options, God prefers us to choose if he has no preference.

However, God is not indifferent about which morally good option we choose, as Scripture makes clear. The rich young man who approached Jesus and asked what he should do to gain everlasting life was not considering whether to do moral good or evil, for he kept all the commandments. Jesus nevertheless told him what to do if he wished to be perfect. This passage (see Mt 19:16–22) makes clear what reason itself tells us: we are not called simply to avoid evil and do *something* good, but to do the greatest good we can. For the rich young man, this meant following Jesus' exhortation: "sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Mt 19:21). Everyone is not called in the same way, but we are all called to discover and do the good God has in mind for us. St. Paul explains: "Be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove

what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2). In short, God does want us to discern his will for us, which means discerning which of the morally good options is best for us. Since it makes no sense to say God wants us to do the impossible, the conclusion is obvious: discernment really is possible.

Indeed, a sincere and determined effort to discern will infallibly succeed. To think otherwise is to assume that God has a plan for us that we may not be able to discover no matter how hard we try and how willing we are to cooperate. That assumption is clearly wrong. It hardly makes sense to imagine God thinking: "I have a plan that is custom made for John (or Mary's) life, but I will not let him (or her) discover that plan." Bearing in mind the truth that a sincere and determined effort to discern God's will cannot fail has great practical value, for it can prevent us from becoming discouraged and giving up on discernment.

Motivation is Crucial

A third point to bear in mind before discerning is this: one must be *motivated* to discern one's personal vocation. Someone might agree that discernment is possible but decide not to do it. He or she may reason: I have already eliminated all the morally bad options. So, what's wrong with choosing whichever of the morally good ones I want? Why should I bother discerning?

There are at least three reasons to discern one's personal vocation. The first reason – which is least helpful as a motivation – is this: We are morally obliged to do so. If God has a preference, am I not obliged to try to discover what it is? After all, his preference is for whatever is best for me, all things considered. Even though I am only considering morally good options, I surely should try to find out which one of them is best. Why is this reason the least helpful as a motivation? Since we are considering only morally good options, any failure to discover and choose the best one would not be the matter of a mortal sin. Of course, we should strive at all costs to avoid *any* sin, but it will not help much to say: "I'm going to discern in order to avoid venial sin." For, when people focus on avoiding sin rather than on doing good, it does not occur to them to discern. They think rather in terms of avoiding obvious grave sins so they can then do whatever they please without endangering their salvation.

The reasons for discerning that really motivate people to do so are that it is in their own interest to discern, and that doing so pleases God. The only people who tend to be concerned with discerning God's will are those who are in a personal relationship with him. Such people do not relate to him legalistically, trying to do the least they can without breaking laws; rather, they realize that God knows them better than they know themselves and loves them more than they love themselves. So, they realize that it is in their own best interest to discern. They know that their surest path to happiness is to discover what God is inviting them to do with their lives and to accept that invitation. They know that by living out their personal vocations, they will do the most good they can, and in so doing will find fulfillment both here and hereafter. Moreover, since they are living in a relationship of love

with God, they naturally want to please him. This, too, motivates them to discern and choose whatever he prefers. In short, their focus is not so much on avoiding sin as on finding true fulfillment and pleasing God. Of course, in seeking their true happiness and striving to please God, they do in fact avoid even venial sin.

These motivations help people overcome the difficulties associated with discerning. I said earlier that discernment is possible, but I did not say that it is easy. People can be tempted to give up on discerning when it becomes difficult; for example, they can be tempted to make a decision based on unruly desires before they have finished discerning. When difficulties arise, it is important to recall why one set out to discern God's will in the first place. People engaged in discernment need to remember that God loves them more than they love themselves and has a plan for their happiness. Reminding ourselves of God's loving plan helps us see that remaining true to the process and results of discernment is in our own interest and is the best way we can love God in return.

Discernment Requires Detachment

This leads us to a fourth point we must bear in mind before discerning, namely, that being properly motivated to discern one's personal vocation presupposes that one is completely detached from any agenda of one's own. Detachment is both necessary and difficult: necessary, because having one's own agenda inevitably blocks discernment and acceptance of God's plan; difficult, because it requires death to self and radical trust in God. However, the difficulty is eased when one sees that to discern one's personal vocation is to open a gift from God, the gift of the best possible plan for one's life. When we recognize that this plan is much better than any we could come up with on our own, we see how self-defeating it is to have our own agenda.

As just noted, having one's own agenda blocks both *discernment* of God's gift of the best plan and *acceptance* of that plan. We shall consider those points in turn.

We cannot honestly discern if from the outset we preclude morally good options or assume that God must want what we want. It is not up to us to take options off the table or insist on certain things before discernment begins. Those who are free to become priests or religious should not assume that God could not possibly be calling them to those ways of life, and also should not assume that he *must* be calling them to those particular paths of holiness. Likewise, people who are free to marry should not assume that God could not possibly be calling them to marry, nor should they assume that marriage *must* be God's plan for their lives. This point also holds true for the many smaller elements of our personal vocation. Our attitude should be this: I want only what God wants, and I'm simply trying to discover what that is. Unless we have this attitude, we are not seeking the gift God wants to give but rather are insisting on getting whatever we happen to want. Obviously, we are not obliged to *feel* equally happy about all the options from the outset, but we should be willing to accept whatever honest discernment yields. Of course, it helps to realize that God eventually gives the cooperative person a desire for whatever plan God has in mind.

Discern only what to try

Here a fifth point emerges that we must bear in mind before discerning: with respect to future possibilities, we cannot discern whether we should *do* something, but only whether we should *try* to do it. The idea may sound strange at first, but it makes perfect sense, as the following example shows. A young man – call him George – should understand himself to be discerning not whether he is called to marry Susan, but only whether he is called to try to do so. For, as noted earlier, God never asks us to do the impossible; and if Susan says no, then it is clearly impossible for George to marry her, which means that God is clearly not calling him to do so. Even if Susan is unreasonable or heartless in saying no, her refusal still makes it clear that God is not calling George to marry her. However, this does not mean that George’s discernment was wrong. As long as he believes that God is calling him only to try to marry Susan, then he should not assume he made a mistake if she refuses. But he was mistaken if he concluded definitively from his discernment that God was calling him actually to marry Susan. The same point obviously holds true if George discerns that he should try to enter a seminary to study for a certain diocese. As long as George realizes that he is called only to try to do this, then he need not assume he made a mistake if he is not accepted.

These observations make it clear that some vocational paths require the consent of more than one person. Failing to bear that in mind can lead to a great deal of bitterness and disillusionment. George might be tempted to think, “Susan (or the bishop) is preventing me from fulfilling my vocation!” He might even be tempted to turn away from God, thinking either that God deceived him or that, despite his best efforts, his discernment was mistaken. These problems can be avoided by realizing that God calls us only to try. Unfortunately, many fail to realize this, and they set themselves up for serious problems.

This point holds true not only when discernment requires someone else’s consent, but whenever we discern. After all, we do not know the future, and we could die at any moment. The real possibility that we could die before we carry something out or that other things could intervene and make something impossible should warn us not to conclude that we are definitely called to do something in the future, but only that we are called to try to do it. Often enough, all God wants is the effort; and if we make the effort, we produce the results he desires. If George does his best to discern, then he can rightly conclude that for some reason, God wants him to put the question to Susan or the vocations director. Doing that much is part of God’s plan, and he will use George’s cooperation in the lives of those involved, even if the answer is no or George dies later that day.

If we remain detached from our own agenda, we do not set ourselves up to be disillusioned and will not be tempted to conclude that God is deceptive or capricious. We must be absolutely committed to carry out whatever we discern, be detached from everything else, and not assume that we have discerned more than God has disclosed to us. It is not easy to be committed to God’s unfolding will and detached from our own; one reason it is so difficult may be that we want our lives to make sense within the context of this world. When we spend time discerning and our efforts to do what we have discerned fail, our lives

seem not to make sense. If, after discerning, George asks Susan to marry him or the diocese to accept him as a seminarian and he receives a negative response, his effort seems futile. His sense of futility will be even greater if Susan or the diocese says yes initially and no later on, or if circumstances intervene so that George cannot marry Susan or be ordained for the diocese after all.

Of course, being detached from our own will does not mean that it is inappropriate for us to grieve when we fail to achieve the good God calls us to try to do. Being properly detached means only that whenever we cannot accomplish the good God asks us to try to do, we must be prepared to ask what he now wants us to try. We must be prepared to switch, as it were, to Plan B when Plan A does not work out. This is precisely what Jesus did. His Father called him to try to gather up the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Although in his divinity Jesus always knows everything and thus knew that Israel would not respond, he humanly hoped that the plan to gather up the lost sheep of Israel would succeed: he naturally hoped that the leaders of Israel would respond and he would achieve the good he sought to accomplish. When he failed to achieve that good because of the hardness of their hearts, he wept over Jerusalem, but he also discerned and did what the Father next called him to do, namely, build his Church on the rock of Peter.

Nothing is wasted

What should we think when we are not able to accomplish the good God asks us to try to do? Here a sixth point emerges that marks the proper attitude for discerning: we must bear in mind that nothing is wasted. For example, God often calls men into the seminary without calling them to become priests. While no one should enter the seminary without engaging in a serious discernment of priesthood, God is perfectly free to call someone into the seminary with a view to calling him out, using the experience to form the man for what God really does have in mind. Thus, even from a this-worldly perspective God's ways often make more sense than they initially seem to make.

Still, we should not expect our lives to make complete sense in this world. We should not expect them to turn out beautiful and well proportioned and perfectly acceptable from a temporal point of view, because we are cooperating with God's plan for our *eternal* happiness. Our task is not to build a beautiful edifice in this world, but rather, as *Gaudium et spes* 38 puts it, to prepare material for the Kingdom of God. And our best efforts, even if unsuccessful from a this-worldly perspective, constitute solid building material that the Lord uses in constructing his kingdom. That is why *Gaudium et spes* 39 explains: "after we have obeyed the Lord, and in his Spirit nurtured on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom, and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise, we will find them again, but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured. This will be so when Christ hands over to the Father a kingdom eternal and universal."¹

We have seen how having one's own agenda blocks a person's ability to discern God's plan, and we must now consider how it also makes it hard to accept God's plan after one has discerned it. The properly motivated discernor is prepared to accept whatever turns out to

be God's plan. After discerning, one can always say, "I now see what God is asking. Nevertheless, the other possibilities are still possible." And of course they are still possible. But one should regard that thought, which was appropriate before discerning, as a temptation after discerning. After all, one began to discern precisely because one wanted to discover which of those possibilities God desires one to choose. One wanted to follow God's plan. To choose some other option after one has discovered what God wants would be to turn away from that plan, even if that other option is good in itself. Still, such temptations arise when we notice the difficulties we will have to endure if we accept the option our discernment indicates is God's will.

To overcome this temptation, we should focus on the benefits of doing what we have discerned and avoid focusing on what stirs desire for the options eliminated by the discernment. For example, if Jane discerns that God is calling her to accept an offer of engagement from Bill, she should not spend time imagining what it would have been like being engaged to Fred. Likewise, if Jim discerns he should try to enter the seminary, he should not spend time imagining what it would be like being engaged to Gloria. One should no longer focus on the appealing aspects of the other options, but rather should accept what one discerns God is asking by taking steps to carry it out. For example, if George discerns he should try to enter the seminary, he should accept his discernment by beginning to implement it, for example, by contacting the vocations director. Again, one should begin the discernment with a commitment to accept whatever gift one discerns God is giving. And after one discerns one should confirm that commitment by actually accepting the gift, or implementing the discernment.

Discernment is ongoing

A seventh point to bear in mind is that discerning one's personal vocation is not a once-for-all event but is ongoing. To make this point clear I am going to change my language slightly. Instead of speaking about discerning one's personal vocation, I will speak, as the title of my paper has it, of discerning the *elements* of one's personal vocation. For one's personal vocation is not a monolithic entity that one discerns once and for all; rather, it unfolds throughout one's entire life, and one can discern its elements only as they become available for discernment.

This point has not always been clearly understood, partly because in former times society was less complex and fewer decisions were required. A young Catholic had one major issue to decide: whether to get married or become a priest or religious. Once that decision was made, many other things took care of themselves. Those who entered religious life had few decisions of their own to make, for they vowed obedience and followed the house rule; and just doing that was regarded as a sure path to heaven. Even married people had many fewer decisions to make than they do now. Career options were quite limited: often the only way to support a family was to farm the land. Decisions about having children also were fairly obvious, for couples generally needed children to help with the work.

Pregnancy was more difficult to achieve because the overall health situation was poorer than it is today and breastfeeding was more common; moreover, many children died in childbirth or at a very early age. Thus, most couples needed to try to achieve pregnancy quite often.

Obviously, people did have some further decisions to make even when times were simpler, but the general pattern of their lives was more clearly set. The decisions they were left with were largely technical ones about the most effective way to accomplish the things they already knew they had a moral responsibility to try to do. So, it was harder to see that decisions beyond those about one's general state in life were decisions about the elements of one's personal vocation. Discernment centered rather on the one big decision about one's state in life, and the need for ongoing discernment was rarely noticed. Vocation was identified with one's state in life, and the idea of personal vocation did not clearly emerge, even though the kernel of this idea is in Scripture.

It is much clearer today than it was in the past that making an important and irrevocable life commitment does not settle everything else in one's life. For example, the discernment of a couple called to marriage does not end at the altar. At various points questions calling for further discernment arise. Should they have another child at this time? Should they move? To what school should they send their children? Should the husband take this job or that one? Should the wife work outside the home and, if so, how much time away is appropriate given the needs of the children? To discern these matters is to discern elements of one's personal vocation.

Nor is everything settled when one enters priesthood or religious life. Even though priests and religious are bound by obedience and thus rarely choose their assignment, they obviously make some choices. For example, a priest may need to discern whether a change is needed in the parish catechetical program, or whom to hire as principal of the school. A religious may need to discern whether to discuss Anselm or Aquinas in class. Even a contemplative religious living a very structured life may need to discern whether to use free time perfecting musical skills or recreating with fellow members of the community, and whether to spend extra time in prayer with Scripture or with works of devotion. Of course, people also must discern many other elements of their personal vocations that are not immediately connected to their state in life, for example, what medical treatment to accept, what friendships to cultivate, whom to vote for, and so forth.

Although major commitments do not settle everything else, they do make it easier to resolve many smaller matters, for fidelity in larger affairs tends to shape up smaller things. For example, the commitment of marriage makes certain demands: not as many options remain open when time and effort must be spent earning a living to support the family, making sure the children receive proper health care and education, conversing with one's spouse, and so forth. The commitment of marriage also resolves smaller matters by excluding options that conflict with the good of the marriage. Everything a married person does need not and should not be subordinated to the marriage, but everything must be coordinated with it. So, for example, a married person who takes up a hobby is not obliged

to do it for the sake of the marriage. But a married person should not choose a hobby that prevents him or her from meeting marital responsibilities. This principle excludes many things that otherwise would be possible and appropriate.

The commitment priests and religious make is different from that of married persons, inasmuch as everything religious and (celibate) priests do should not just be coordinated with their religious commitment but subordinated to it. Everything they do, including their vacations and hobbies, should be done for the sake of helping people find salvation. Here it is even clearer how fidelity in the larger things tends to shape up the smaller. Of course, everyone should live by the principle Paul articulates in Colossians 3:17: "whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." But married people can carry out that injunction without doing everything they do for the sake of their marriage, for they serve other human goods in addition to marriage. By contrast, priests and religious should be completely committed to the religious good. They carry out Paul's injunction by ordering everything to their more specific vocational commitment of helping others find salvation: that is the ordering principle for their pursuit of any good.

Even lesser commitments shape up a certain number of smaller things; for example, a commitment to take an evening class in business management will likely determine how one ought to spend the evening before a test, and given the cost of tuition may also determine whether one should hold off on buying a new car. Of course, the decision to take the course may itself have been made as a way of meeting responsibilities determined by a larger commitment.

In short, we need to keep finding the elements of our personal vocation all our life. Discernment does not end when we have discerned our general state in life as a married person, priest, religious or other member of consecrated life, or single layperson. The larger commitments do simplify future discernments by providing principles for discerning and by removing incompatible options, but there are always further elements of one's personal vocation to discover as life unfolds.

II. The Process of Discernment

We are now prepared to take up the issue of how to discern the elements of one's personal vocation. In this section, I will rely in part on the teachings of St. Ignatius Loyola about discernment. St. Ignatius did not have a clearly developed idea of personal vocation. He tended to think in terms of having one clear issue to resolve, and so he includes in his *Spiritual Exercises*, his famous guide book for spiritual directors, what he calls the "election," in which he offers advice about discerning one's state in life.² Nevertheless, Ignatius clearly realized that we need to make other decisions, and he himself applied the spiritual principles he uses for the election of a state of life to other matters that required discernment. He did not articulate the concept of personal vocation, but he had the underlying insight. After all, he gave to his Society of Jesus the motto AMDG: *ad maiorem*

Dei gloriam (for the greater glory of God). He understood what we have been emphasizing, namely, that at every moment God wants us to do not just what is good but what is best, all things considered. To know what that will be usually requires discernment; I say “usually,” because St. Ignatius explains that on rare occasion “God our Lord moves and attracts the will in such a way that a devout person, without doubting or being able to doubt, carries out what was proposed.”³ This, he says, is what happened in the case of St. Paul and St. Matthew when they were called to follow Jesus. But usually we have to go through a process of discernment.

Consider life's purpose and ask God's help

How then do we discern? St. Ignatius exhorts us first of all to focus “only on the thing which is more conducive to the end for which I am created,” namely, “to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord” and to save my soul.⁴ We are to be detached from our own self will and seek only what God wants. We also should pray, begging God to help us see what he is asking us to do. This should not be a perfunctory measure but a heartfelt cry to the Lord. Our prayer should be persistent and should arise from within the context of our personal relationship with God; we should turn to him with trust and relate to him whatever emotions we may experience, including any anxiety about what the future holds for us.

Consider gifts and needs

Then, since every vocation is a call to service, we should consider our gifts and experiences and try to judge how they match up best with the needs of the world around us.⁵ In doing this, we should be open to possibilities that people do not typically consider. For example, one may have gifts that would be of great use in the third world. We should not fail to consider the option of working there simply because it may be unfamiliar or initially unappealing; rather, we should give special consideration to serving where the needs are greatest. Of course, we also should consider reasons not to serve there: one may need to be available for one's family, or be incapable of learning the language well enough, or not be in good enough health. But we should not eliminate possibilities just on the basis of an initial emotional aversion. We should avoid taking for granted that our natural inclination indicates how and where God is calling us to serve.

When we proceed in this way, it quickly becomes clear that many upright options simply do not match our gifts. For example, most people will see that they are not called to try to become astronauts or professional athletes because they lack the necessary gifts or training, or because the scant likelihood of success in these areas as compared with others makes it unreasonable for them to invest the time, energy, and resources to try to develop the necessary skills. Some options can be discarded almost immediately, while others require deeper reflection.

Consider pros and cons

St. Ignatius instructs us to consider the pros and cons of each option.⁶ It might even help to write these out. Sometimes proceeding in this way eliminates all but one option and leaves nothing to discern, but often enough two or more options remain. At this point, it is time for emotion to play its part. St. Ignatius suggests that we imagine how we would advise someone else in our exact situation, and follow the advice we would give to that other person. He also has us imagine what we would wish we had chosen if we were looking back on our choice, first from our deathbed and then from the perspective of judgment day. He says we should decide now what we would then wish we had decided.⁷

Let emotion play its part

But how do we narrow the options? We should pay close attention to our affective response to each of them, for God speaks to the heart. St. Ignatius's Rules (or guidelines) for the Discernment of Spirits are particularly apt here. He writes:

In the case of those going from good to better, the good angel touches the soul gently, lightly, and sweetly, like a drop of water going into a sponge. The evil spirit touches it sharply, with noise and disturbance, like a drop of water falling onto a stone. In the case of those who are going from bad to worse, these spirits touch the souls in the opposite way. The reason for this is the fact that the disposition of the soul is either similar to or different from the respective spirits who are entering. When the soul is different, they enter with perceptible noise and are quickly noticed. When the soul is similar, they enter silently, like those who go into their own house by an open door.⁸

The idea is that if we are upright, God speaks to us through the desires of our hearts. It makes no sense to tell an adulterer or a greedy person to follow his or her desires, but it makes perfect sense to tell someone who is interested in discovering and following God's will to do so. This surely is what St. Augustine means in exhorting us to love and do what we will.

Beware of deception

As noted above, discernment is possible only among morally acceptable options. It can be tempting to treat as available for discernment matters that Church teaching indicates have already been settled; however, to proceed in that manner is to misunderstand and impede discernment. True discernment, again, is an effort to discover God's will by examining one's affective responses to various possible courses of action that reason has not ruled out. If possibilities that should have been precluded as immoral are treated as live options, one can easily turn the process of discernment into an exercise in rationalization. The reason is that if a person treats as a legitimate option something that he should have recognized as illicit and eliminated, then he has set himself up to misread the interior movements he

experiences. He will likely assume that his very willingness to “discern” God’s will indicates that he fits into the category of those who really are going from good to better. With that assumption in place, he is liable to read the sting of conscience caused by the good spirit as an obstacle set up by the evil spirit and to read the apparent pleasures proposed by the evil spirit as consolations from the good spirit to encourage him to move in the direction he wants. One thinks, for example, of the priest or religious who attempts to “discern” whether God is calling him to leave his priestly or vowed life in order to move in with a woman without benefit of marriage. All too easily, such a person assumes that the appealing emotions associated with the course of action he should not be considering are stirred by the Holy Spirit, and that the unpleasant emotions associated with remaining true to his commitment are stirred by the evil spirit.

Of course, none of us is completely converted. We all have some desires that are not fully integrated into our converted selves. We must distinguish those desires from the deepest desires of our converted hearts, and be swayed only by the latter. If we have eliminated the morally illegitimate options and sincerely strive to do God’s will, we can be confident that he will speak to us through the desires of our hearts. After some time of pondering the different options, one eventually will emerge as the more appealing, and we will be at peace with embracing it. When that happens, our discernment is over. Then we must accept the discernment by beginning to live it out.

PETER F. RYAN, S.J.

Professor of Moral Theology

Mount St. Mary’s Seminary