

To know and do God's will: A short Ignatian primer

Because we are rational human beings, it is best for us not only to *do* God's will, but also first to *know* God's will and to *choose* to do it freely.

🕒 July 31, 2018 👤 Fr. Charles Fox 📁 Essay, Features 💬 1

🖨️ [Print](#)

Portrait of St. Ignatius of Loyola by Francisco Zurbaran (1598-1664)

Today's Memorial of St. Ignatius of Loyola (July 31) provides a good opportunity to explore one of the choicest fruits of this saint's extraordinary life: Ignatian discernment of spirits and of God's will.

Of course, this article is only an introduction to a spiritual tradition that can be highly specialized. I wish to offer a simple, practical approach to this important part of our Catholic spiritual heritage. My hope is that you will find this approach to the spiritual life helpful in understanding yourself, the forces at work in your life—both internal and external, and in understanding how we come to know the will of God as we engage in the many different kinds of decision making our lives entail. I am eternally grateful to the priests who taught me Ignatian discernment, especially because it played such a critical role in helping me to hear and to say “yes” to God's call to the priesthood.

Spirituality rooted in life

“May you attain full knowledge of God's will through perfect wisdom and spiritual insight.”
— Colossians 1:9b

St. Ignatius of Loyola was a sixteenth century Basque (Spanish) nobleman and soldier who as a young man seems to have had a mixture of high ideals and an easy-going personality. While serving as a soldier, the young Ignatius received a leg wound in battle, and returned home to recover from the injury.

It was during this time of recovery at Loyola that Ignatius' conversion began, as he read a book on

the life of Christ and another on the lives of the Saints. Providentially, these books were given to Ignatius despite his request for novels, of which the household had none. After reading the books, Ignatius noticed a pattern of joyful feelings he experienced, both as he thought about the life of Christ and the lives of the saints, and afterwards. He also noticed that while worldly thoughts brought immediate pleasure, this pleasure was fleeting.

This key insight became a point of entry for Ignatius into a new life: the path of sainthood. That path took Ignatius from Spain to Paris and Rome, during which time he had powerful spiritual experiences, was educated, became associated with other like-minded men, and formed the Society of Jesus, commonly known as the Jesuit Order. The Society of Jesus has made a profound impact on the Church and the world, through its holy work in missionary evangelization, education, and spiritual direction.

Jesuit spiritual direction is greatly influenced by the principles of Ignatian spirituality and discernment, as found in St. Ignatius' great work *The Spiritual Exercises* and elsewhere. These principles of spirituality and discernment are based on some core principles:

- Humans are created for an *end*, and that we are to dedicate ourselves wholeheartedly to the pursuit of that end—that “end,” of course, is God;
- The pursuit of this end involves a fundamental *choice* for Jesus Christ and his Kingdom, and against Satan;
- Our spiritual lives are influenced and affected by various forces and “movements”—internal and external, good, evil, and indifferent, physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual;
- Through prayer, careful examination, and especially with the help of qualified spiritual direction, it is possible to recognize these forces and movements, to sort them out and understand them, and to come to know God’s will regarding particular choices we face.

Ignatian discernment includes two distinct stages: discernment of spirits and discernment of God’s will.

Discernment of Spirits

“Test everything; retain what is good. Refrain from every kind of evil.” — I Thessalonians 15:21-22

The discernment of spirits, among other things, is the necessary preparation for discerning God’s will. In the discernment of spirits, a disciple of Jesus strives to recognize the movements at work in his or her life, the origins of those movements, and the direction in which they propose to move the

individual. As we have seen above, these movements can be internal or external, good, evil, or indifferent, physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual. You might say that half the battle of discernment of spirits is simply acknowledging all of the different movements taking place and forces at work in our lives at any given moment!

For the person who has made a fundamental choice for Christ, and is basically growing or maturing in the spiritual life, there are times of both *consolation* and *desolation*. There is a distinction to be made between spiritual and non-spiritual consolation and desolation. Briefly, non-spiritual consolation and desolation occur as the result of non-spiritual causes. For example, I might be happy when I sit down to my favorite dinner or when the weather is especially pleasant, and would be upset if I was forced to eat a diet of gruel or if the weather was miserable. There can certainly be spiritual dimensions to such experiences, and it is important to be attentive to the relationships between different levels and dimensions of human experience, but in and of themselves these experiences are non-spiritual.

Spiritual consolation and desolation, on the other hand, refer to *basic states* of one's spiritual life, in which a person either experiences God in a richly-felt, close way or experiences God as remote and oneself as desolate, dry, or ill-at-ease. We should know how to act during times of consolation and desolation, but one rule that applies to both is that when we experience one we ought to be mindful of the other. In a time of consolation, we should spend some time preparing for desolation, and in a time of desolation, we should remember former times of consolation and put our hope in God.

It is important that as a person begins discernment of spirits, he identifies in prayer what basic state he is in: consolation or desolation. Knowing what basic state a person is in, he is better able to identify the movements in his soul and their sources. Two of the most important kinds of movements have as their sources the "good spirit" or the "evil spirit." These terms sometimes represent broader categories, encompassing wide ranges of forces at work in one's life, but they can also specifically indicate the work of the Holy Spirit or an evil spirit.

For the person who is basically maturing and growing closer to Christ, the work of the good spirit is strengthening and encouraging, giving peace, comfort, joy, and delight, and sustaining growth. The evil spirit discourages, proposes problems with the positive course of one's life, stirs disquiet and anxiety, as well as sadness for things left behind when one follows Jesus, and generally prompts turmoil and the temptation to turn away from Jesus and to something else. If a person was basically moving deeper into a life of sin and further away from Christ, the effects wrought by the work of these spirits would be reversed, with the evil spirit acting as a cheerleader and the good spirit stinging the conscience and prompting repentance and conversion in the sinner.

How do we deal with consolation and desolation? We probably need less help dealing with consolation, but it is important to be judicious in evaluating consolation. To begin, we should try to find out whether there is a previous cause to the consolation. If we find a cause, we should determine whether that cause is the good spirit or the evil spirit, who at times will disguise himself

as an angel of light. Now, we should not be alarmed by this possibility. The evil spirit puts on a good disguise, and can be very persuasive, but he has certain qualities that give him away. The evil spirit is noisy and disturbing. The “fruits” of the evil spirit’s suggestions will be evil, even if he is able to make them appear good at certain times. And the evil spirit will pull one away from Jesus by any means necessary. The good spirit, on the other hand, is gentle, produces good fruit in us, and draws us closer to Jesus.

In times of desolation, we should be patient and persevere in faith. We respond to desolation by means of increased prayer, meditation, penance, and works of charity. Celebrating the sacraments faithfully is always important, but is perhaps especially important during times of desolation, because they provide a sure and certain experience of Jesus Christ and his saving grace. Finally, it is good to try and identify the cause of desolation: desolation can occur when our faith has grown weak, but those with very strong faith can also experience desolation. In the former case, we might be able to make adjustments to bolster our faith life. In the latter case, God may be allowing our experience of desolation in order to purify our love for him and unite us more closely to Jesus, who suffered for us and invites us to join him on the way of the cross that leads to resurrection and glory.

Discernment of God’s Will

“*Ad maiorem Dei gloriam.*” (“For the greater glory of God.”) — Motto of the Society of Jesus

It is clear that discernment of God’s will is extremely consequential in the lives of Christians, for a number of reasons:

- First, one of our most basic commitments and responsibilities as Christians is to do the will of God. In this, we closely follow Jesus, who told us, “I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me” (John 6:38).
- Secondly, discernment of God’s will is of great importance because of the weighty choices people often face, choices that have important and sometimes life-long consequences. The discernment of one’s vocation in life is such a choice, but certainly not the only one. Such choices often surface in questions such as the following: What is God calling me to do with my life? Should I marry this person? Should I join this religious community? Should I take this job? How should I handle this situation? What do I do now?
- Thirdly, discernment the normal way we will come to know God’s will for us. I think it goes without saying that God usually reveals himself and his plan for us in quiet ways, gradually, over time and not in bold, dramatic, and immediately decisive ways. Sudden moments of enlightenment or inspiration certainly occur at times, but even these experiences are best supplemented by periods of prayerful discernment, so that we can be sure it is the good spirit

guiding us and not the evil spirit disguised as an angel of light.

My own experience of discerning God's call to the priesthood included no single, absolutely decisive moment, except, of course, for my ordinations to the diaconate and priesthood! There was no single time beforehand when I knew that I had received, right then and there, God's entire and final message to me regarding my vocation. I learned God's will over a long period of time, progressively, through much prayer punctuated by moments of greater clarity. The cumulative effect of this prayer, using the principles of Ignatian discernment, was *moral certitude* about the life to which God was calling me.

Moral certitude is an important concept in discernment, because it indicates the kind of certainty we can reasonably expect regarding God's will. We cannot reasonably expect *absolute certitude*, which is the kind of certitude we have that "two plus two equals four," but that does not undermine the significance of moral certitude. Moral certitude is still a strong, certain conviction about the truth of something. In a certain sense, moral certitude is more important to us than absolute certitude, since I am committed to living and dying for my belief in God and in his will for me, but would neither live nor die for a mathematical formula.

So moral certitude represents the kind of certainty for which we strive as we discern God's will. To the term "God's will" we can add that which is "for the greater glory of God," a translation of the Jesuit motto, *Ad maiorem Dei gloriam* (often abbreviated AMDG). The goal of discernment is to determine which option available to us will give *greater* glory to God. Perhaps those decisions are most familiar to us in which one option will give God glory and the other choice will not. But we must also recognize that we often face decisions in which both or all of the available options will give glory to God, and we are called to discern which will give him greater glory than the others.

Now that our goal in discerning God's will is coming into view, we can begin to look at the way we progress towards that goal. The essential attitude and activity of this discernment is that of prayer. Prayer is the hallmark of good discernment, because in prayer we not only meet God in a special way, but also allow him to speak to us in a way that is difficult to achieve in other circumstances. We encounter God in many ways during the course of our lives, but prayer—especially when it includes lengthy periods of silence—gives us a chance to listen to God, to receive well the words God speaks to us, and to discern how we are to put his words into action.

Within the context of prayer, it is important that we understand our basic spiritual state—whether we are in consolation or desolation, what spiritual movements we are experiencing, and what are the sources of those movements. These conditions all help to shape our discernment.

There are other conditions that shape our discernment, however. One of these conditions is the collective *concrete circumstances* of my life as I discern God's will. For example, the fact that I am a priest will be a major factor in any future discernment I undertake. I cannot simply say tomorrow that I feel "called" to missionary work in Africa, without taking into serious consideration my status,

commitment, and responsibilities as a priest of the Archdiocese of Detroit.

Similarly, we must take into consideration that God will not call us to something that is impossible, and will certainly not call us to do anything that is against Church teaching. Of course, “impossible” and “against Church teaching” need to be rightly understood, but a basic, well-informed sense of these things should provide sufficient guidance in most circumstances, and may save us a lot of the unnecessary pain we would likely suffer if we seriously considered an option that was “out of bounds” for us.

Saying “yes” to God

“Thy will be done.” — from the Our Father (cf. Matt 6:10)

Thus far, we have identified the two basic kinds of discernment—discernment of spirits and discernment of God’s will—and seen that discernment of spirits is a good and necessary preparation for the discernment of God’s will. We have also seen what we can generally expect from fruitful discernment of God’s will, that is, *moral certitude* about God’s will for us regarding a particular decision, and that the goal of this discernment is to do both that which is God’s will and also that which is, “for the greater glory of God” (*Ad maiorem Dei gloriam*).

We will now get into a bit of the “how-to” of discerning God’s will. Here are some practical rules for discerning God’s will:

- *Pray, pray, pray.* We have seen that prayer is the essential attitude and activity of discernment of God’s will. You may well experience enlightenment at moments other than your prayer times, but prayer is very often what sets-up even these moments. You should pray before, during, and after making important decisions, seeking God’s *enlightenment* and *guidance* before the decision, *moral certitude* at the moment of decision, and *confirmation* after making the decision. All of these three “moments” of prayer are important, since usually no one experience is decisive and final.
- *Know where you are before you decide where you are going.* Are you in consolation or desolation? What basic choices have you already made? What is your situation right now? What obligations and responsibilities do you have? What commitments have you made? What are your gifts and talents? What are your limitations, or the areas in which you struggle? What is possible and what is impossible for you at this time in your life?
- *Clarify your options.* Identify your options with enough precision to evaluate them prayerfully and critically. Do not “make up” options for clarity’s sake, but ask God to lead you to see your options clearly. Part of this work of clarifying options will entail eliminating “options” that are not really possible. Such false options may be impossible *generally*, for example, because they

violate Church teaching. They also may be impossible *for a particular person*, because your basic makeup, gifts, talents, or limitations do not allow for a certain course of action. And they may be impossible for you *at this time*, because of unbreakable commitments you have made or because of other temporary limitations.

- *Do not change your course in times of desolation.* This is one of those rules that needs to be emphasized precisely because we are often tempted to break it. It is when we are feeling badly that the idea of changing our lives occurs to us in the first place. It is clear, however, that what one has chosen during a time of consolation, he or she should *not* change during a time of desolation. Be patient and wait for the return of consolation before making an important decision.
- *Pay particular attention to the option to which you feel drawn when you feel closest to God.* Ask yourself, "At times when I have felt closest to God, what have I felt drawn to?" The answer to this question can be a deciding factor in discerning God's will. Finding the answer to this question will require that we are able to identify those moments when we experience God's presence most powerfully, and that we are attentive to the often gentle "pull" of the Holy Spirit towards the path down which God is calling us. This rule was of critical importance in my own decision to become a priest, as was the next and final rule we will consider.
- *Recognize that the decision you face is not so much a matter of deciding between "Option A" and "Option B" but rather answering the question, "How do I choose Jesus more deeply?"* We can easily become twisted in knots when we are deciding between two or more options, especially when we have determined positively that both of the options would give glory to God. This is where the Jesuit motto, "For the *greater* glory of God" (emphasis added) again becomes important. We can also become confused when our feelings would seem to lead us away from what we basically believe is God's will for us. Human feelings are important, and we often do well to take them into consideration, but we need to understand them carefully and to evaluate them in light of deeper spiritual movements. What does it mean to choose Jesus more deeply? I think that any well-formed Christian has an interior sense about what this means, but one good way to arrive at an answer is to look carefully at the invitations of Jesus to prospective disciples in the Gospels, such as the following: "Follow me" (Matt 4:19); "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Matt 19:21); "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch" (Luke 5:4). These are only examples, but we should always ask ourselves what choice represents a deeper choice of Jesus, *to follow Jesus, to live in and with Jesus.*

If we successfully discern which option constitutes our way of choosing Jesus more deeply, and we have the courage to make that choice without reserve, we can be sure we have done well.

Discernment is undoubtedly important for every Christian, because we face so many decisions and because we are so very concerned about doing the will of God. Because we are rational human

beings, it is best for us not only to *do* God's will, but also first to *know* God's will and to *choose* to do it freely. In this way, we offer our lives to God more completely and more perfectly follow Jesus who in the Garden of Gethsemane prayed to his Father, "Your will be done!" (Matt 26:42).

About Fr. Charles Fox > [2 Articles](#)

Rev. Charles Fox is an assistant professor of theology at Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Detroit. He holds an S.T.D. in dogmatic theology from the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas (Angelicum), Rome.
