

Living Well: Christian Practices for Everyday Life
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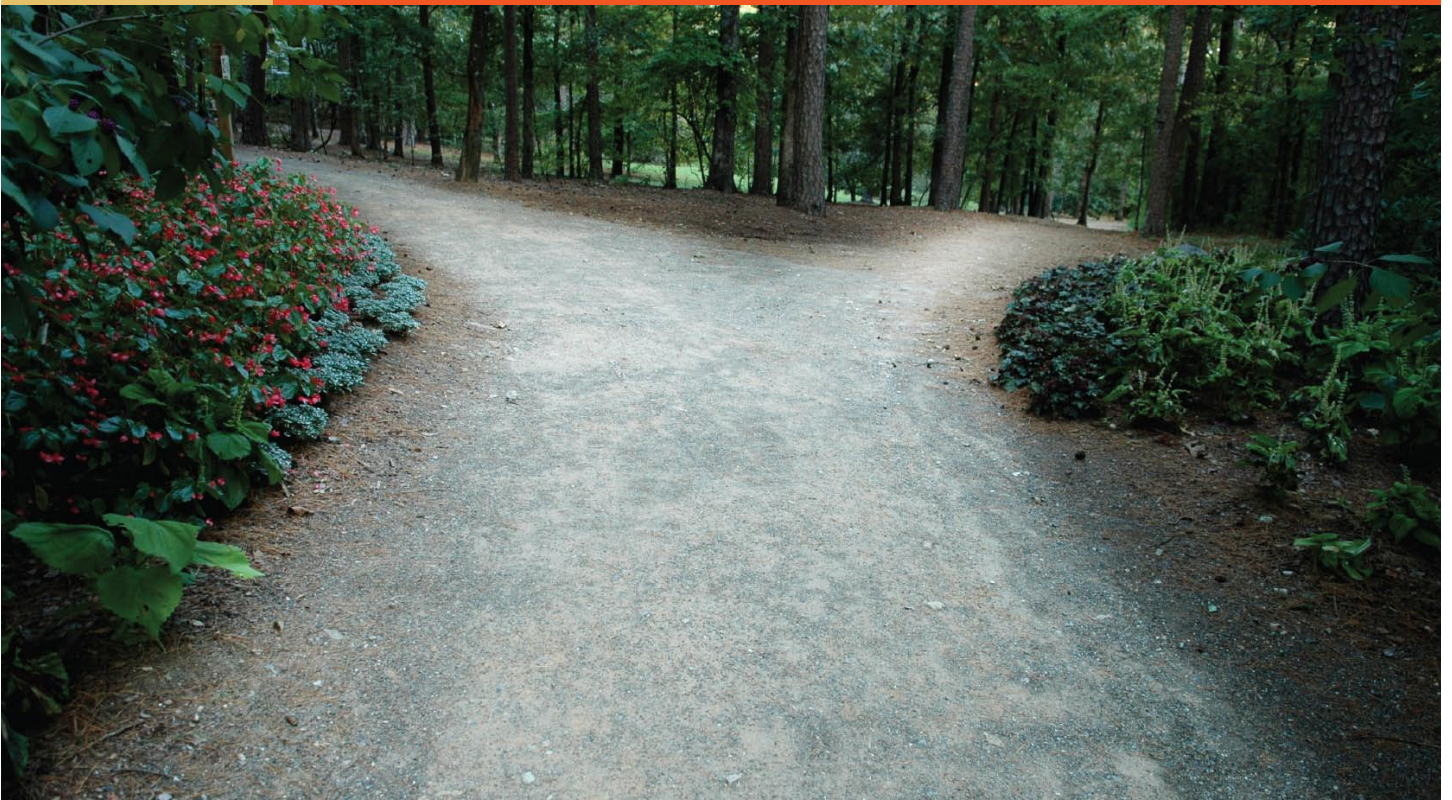
Living Well

Christian Practices for Everyday Life



3

Discernment



Yearning

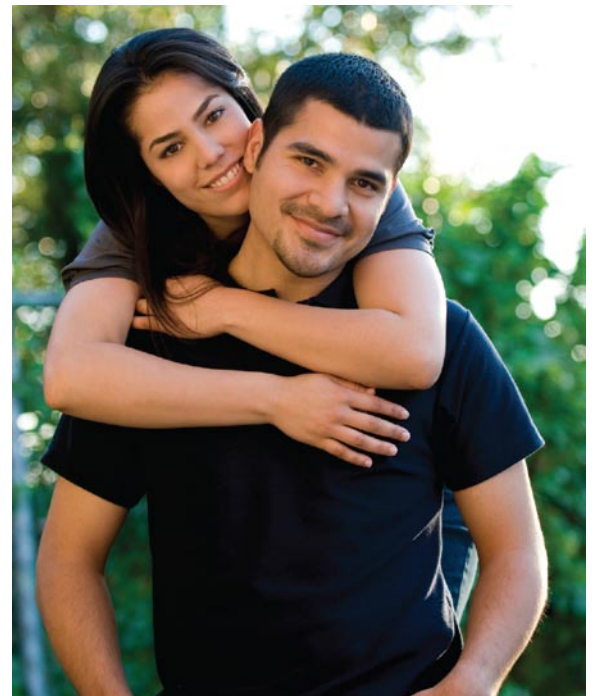


Life is full of choices. Sometimes these choices are momentous: deciding on a career path, choosing a marriage partner, having children, or retiring from full-time work. Other choices are not quite as momentous, but they are important nonetheless because they give shape to our life: moving to another place for a new job, pursuing further education, finding a new church, caring for aging parents—all these decisions shape who we are and who we are becoming.

Discernment in Real Life

■ Janet, a geologist, has been offered a high-paying job with an oil company in a southern state, far from her northeastern home. She has also been offered a job with the United States government that would pay less but be more enjoyable work. This job would give her an opportunity to make a difference by developing environmental practices that could be written into law—and it would be located closer to her present home. Like so many college graduates today, Janet is overwhelmed by student loans and the implications of long-term debt for buying a home or a car or even just taking a vacation. Which job offer should she accept?

■ Tim and Wendy have just returned from their church's annual mission trip, where they fell in love with a little Guatemalan orphan, Isabelita, age seven. Their own children, seventeen and twenty, will soon be on their own. They begin to discuss adopting, trying to weigh their own desires against Isabelita's needs. Is it better to assist Isabelita from afar so that she remains in her own culture, or to bring her to the United States and raise her?





■ Tom, a widower with grown children, retired a few months ago from his job as an estimator for an international plumbing and steam-fitting business. He appreciates that he no longer feels as exhausted as in the past five years, and he certainly does not miss the intensity of his former lifestyle. Yet he is beginning to find his days stretching before him with little to occupy his time and energy. He realizes that he must find something worthwhile to fill his time, but what?

■ Anne lives 1300 miles away from her aging parents. The last time she lived less than 100 miles from her parents, she was 18. Over the past year she has begun to realize that her parents are not able to keep up their home, the house they moved into when she was 3 months old. The house, their ailments, and all their other responsibilities are beginning to overwhelm them. Slowly her parents are recognizing that it is time to sell the house and begin a new life in a new setting. Anne feels a responsibility to be involved in this next stage of her parent's life. Should they come to live with Anne and her family? Should they move into assisted living? How should she care for her parents?



■ Jessica is gifted in the arts—dancing, singing and acting—and wants to pursue her dream in college. Her parents are concerned about the family's financial situation and want Jessica to graduate college with as little debt as possible, prepared to enter a career that would pay the bills. Her parents' hopes were tested when Jessica informed them she is turning down a full scholarship to a local college for a much smaller scholarship at a college where she could pursue a vocal performance major. It's hard for them to see a "marketable income" for a performance major. What should they do and say?



3 Discernment

Reflecting

How do you make decisions? How do you make decisions as a household? Do you mull over the choices alone? Do you gather your family or a group of trusted friends together to test the best responses? What role does God play in your discernment? How do you figure out what God wants you to do? How do your religious beliefs contribute to your decision-making process?

Take a few moments to reflect on decisions you have made.

- Recall a decision that in retrospect was a wise one. How did you make it? What factors did you weigh? With whom did you consult? How did you manage opposing points of view? What would have been the consequences if you had made a different decision? Where was God in this decision?
- Recall a decision you made that you now regret. What was the process by which you made that decision? Have you since discovered clues about how you could have decided differently? Where was God in this decision?
- Make a short list of persons you might call when you are faced with a tough decision. What do you look for from these persons? How do they help you?
- When you think about the major decisions you have made in your life, how have your religious or spiritual values influenced your decisions?



Exploring

The word “discernment” comes from the Latin word *discernere*, which means to distinguish, to sift out, to separate that which may be from God from all the other influences in our lives, good or bad. Discernment opens us up to listen to and recognize the voice and patterns of God’s direction in our lives.

Jesus and Discernment

Jesus returned from the Jordan full of the Holy Spirit and was led by the Spirit into the desert, where he was tempted by the Devil for forty days. In all that time he ate nothing, so that he was hungry when it was over.

The Devil said to him, “If you are God’s Son, order these stones to turn into bread.” But Jesus answered, “The scripture says, ‘Human beings cannot live on bread alone.’”

Then the Devil took him up and showed him in a second all the kingdoms of the world. “I will give you all this power and all this wealth,” the Devil told him. “It has all been handed over to me, and I can give it to anyone I choose. All this will be yours, then, if you worship me.” Jesus answered, “The scripture says, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only him!’”

Then the Devil took him to Jerusalem and set him on the highest point of the Temple, and said to him, “If you are God’s Son, throw yourself down from here. For the scripture says, ‘God will order his angels to take good care of you.’ It also says, ‘They will hold you up with their hands, so that not even your feet will be hurt on the stones.’” But Jesus answered, “The scripture says, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

When the Devil finished tempting Jesus in every way, he left him for a while.

— Luke 4:1–13



The story of Jesus’ temptation in the desert is an exercise in discernment. Jesus recognizes the temptations for what they are: invitations to satisfy what one hungers for, to be admired, even worshiped, by people, and to own all imaginable goods. The spirit of these temptations runs counter to the Spirit of God in the life of Jesus. This wilderness scene gives us a vivid image of the discrimination involved in discernment. We need to pay attention, to look deep into our lives and sort out the various motivations for our thoughts and actions. Of the many inner and outer voices that prompt us, which will we heed?

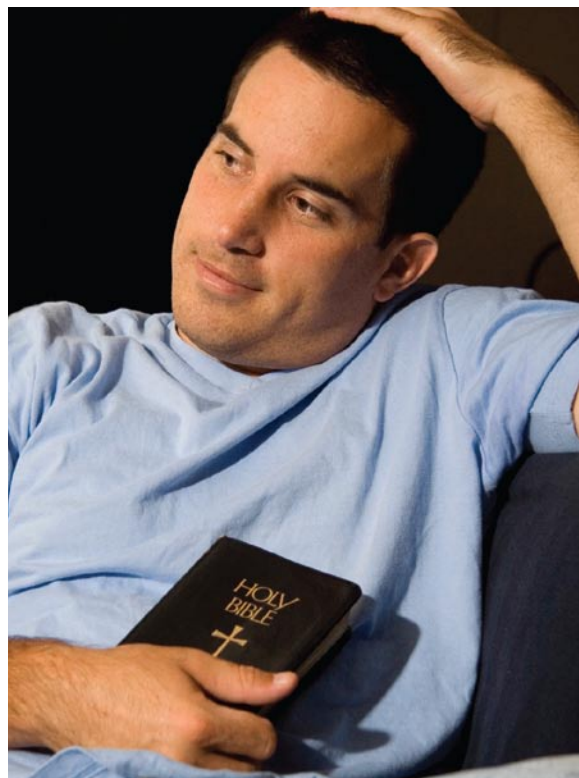
The Christian Practice of Discernment

The Christian tradition has long recognized the importance of discernment. Because our identity is formed in part through our decisions, the making of decisions is actually a privileged moment for growing in discipleship. Through our choices, we can become the person God is calling us to be.

Because our decisions are so central to our identity as persons and as Christians, we can look to the Christian tradition for help in the process of decision-making. That help is called “discernment.” The Latin root of the verb “to discern” means to discriminate. Thus, in the Christian spiritual tradition, discernment refers to the process of discriminating between that which expresses God’s call and anything that runs counter to it—in other words, sifting out what is of God and what is not.

Christians have been discerning from biblical times to the present, seeking to respond to God’s call within their personal prayer and the formal worship of the gathered faith community, in their moral choices, or simply in the ebb and flow of ordinary life. Whenever we seek to answer such questions as “How is God present here?” “How can I know what God is calling me to do?” “Is this just me, or is this really God?” or “Is God calling us to go forward with our plan?” we are engaging in discernment.

Discernment, then, is the process of intentionally becoming aware of how God is present, active, and calling us as individuals and communities so that we can respond with increasingly greater faithfulness. (Adapted from: *The Art of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision-Making* by Elizabeth Liebert)



Believe in the Goodness of God

*Lord, you have examined me and you know me.
You know everything I do;
from far away you understand all my thoughts.
You see me, whether I am working or resting;
you know all my actions.
Even before I speak,
you already know what I will say.
You are around me on every side;
you protect me with your power.
Your knowledge of me is too deep;
it is beyond my understanding
— Psalm 139:1–6*

The first building block of the discernment process is the belief in the goodness of God. The God who examines us and knows us deeply, more than we know ourselves, is a loving and gracious God who wants the best for us. To really open ourselves to knowing and doing the will of God requires trust that God’s intentions toward us are deeply good. It is a belief held deep in the core of our being that God’s will is the best thing that could happen to us under any circumstances.

Believe that Love is Our Primary Calling

“Which commandment is the most important of all?”

Jesus replied, “The most important one is this: ‘Listen, Israel! The Lord our God is the only Lord. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second most important commandment is this: ‘Love your neighbor as you love yourself.’ There is no other commandment more important than these two.”

— Mark 12:28–31

The second building block of the discernment process is the belief that love is our primary calling. Jesus summarizes the entire law—all the requirements of doing what God requires of us—in the triple commandment of loving God with everything we have, and loving our neighbor and ourselves. Love is what’s most important in life. It is the foundation of life in Christ. Everything depends on our love of God, neighbor, and self.

The choices we make are always about love and which choice enables us to keep following God into love. There may be other factors to consider, but the deepest question for us as Christian people is, what does love call for in this situation? What would love do? Discernment is intended to take us deeper and deeper into the heart of God’s will, that we would follow God passionately into love.



Believe that God Communicates with Us

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, who will stay with you forever. He is the Spirit, who reveals the truth about God. The world cannot receive him, because it cannot see him or know him. But you know him, because he remains with you and is in you.

The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and make you remember all that I have told you.

— John 14:16–17, 26

The third building block is the belief that God does communicate with us through the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is given to help us know the demands of love in our situation. The practices of discernment assume a deep-seated belief in God's presence and action through the Holy Spirit in the midst of our daily experience. It assumes that God's will continues to be revealed as it is needed and as we are able to hear it and respond to it.

Through the Holy Spirit, the risen Christ is present with us today. We can rely, then, on the Holy Spirit to bring to mind and to heart that which we need to live out our Christian life today.





Believe in Life

Today I am giving you a choice between good and evil, between life and death. If you obey the commands of the Lord your God, which I give you today, if you love him, obey him, and keep all his laws, then you will prosper and become a nation of many people.

I am now giving you the choice between life and death, between God's blessing and God's curse, and I call heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Choose life.

— Deuteronomy 30:15–16, 19

The fourth building block is the belief that we are called to choose life in all of our decisions. Discernment grounds our capacity to live a fully and truly human life. In discernment, we are constantly choosing life over death that we may live in the love of God. In discernment, then, we move beyond avoiding evil. Among good options, we seek those that better align us with God's creative purpose.

Discernment always aims at enhancing one's participation in the work of God; it is always undertaken for the glory of God and the healing of the world. Therefore, several dispositions are vital for the practice to be followed with integrity:

- *A passionate commitment to follow God.* The guidance we seek is toward the decision that will bring us into the fullest possible participation in the work of God in the world.
- *An attitude of indifference toward all other drives and desires.* If we are to align ourselves with God's purposes, we must first detach ourselves from our own desires for wealth, prestige, and security.
- *A deep sensitivity to the ways and being of God.* This sensitivity is cultivated through prayer, reading and meditating on Scripture, worship, and faithful acts of mercy and justice.

(Frank Rogers, "Discernment," *Practicing Our Faith*)

Living

Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God—what is good and is pleasing to him and is perfect.

— Romans 12:2

Discernment means making a discriminating choice between two or more good options, seeking the best for this moment. These choices, while personal and conditional, are set within the community of faith and honor our previous well-made decisions. Discernment does not bring us absolute certainty, but rather operates in a climate of faith. Seeking to follow God's call moves us toward that which is better for us individually and for our world, and assures us that God will accompany us into the unknown.

(Elizabeth Liebert, *The Art of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision-Making*)

Practicing Discernment

We know that the decision is in one sense “already made,” since the answer is deep inside us. Our body, mind, and soul know what's best for us at this time. We only need to bring it to consciousness, sort through the options and find the energy (grace) of the moment.

(Mary Margaret Funk, *Tools Matter for Practicing the Spiritual Life*)

How can we practice discernment in our lives as we seek to make good choices and follow God's will for us? How can we bring forth the decision that lies deep within us? Here are several steps that can guide you in the practice of discernment, whether as an individual or as a household. Be patient with the process. Remember, the more you practice discernment the more natural it will become.

1. Name the issue.

Begin by discovering and naming the issue or choice you face. What is really at stake is not always self-evident. Carefully framing the issue not only helps clarify the matter for discernment, but also begins the process of sifting and discriminating that is at the heart of discernment.

2. Pray for enlightenment.

We spend time in prayer and turn completely to God as we ask for guidance to go God's

way. We should pray for guidance about the right action and for the ability to carry out the decision. Here's where a pattern of prayer is the key ingredient. If we only pray when we have a major choice or a divide in the road, we will have a hard time praying at the moment of discernment. There are hints and road signs along life's path, but what makes our life a way of God is having a practice of prayer.

*Protect me, O God; I trust in you for safety.
I say to the Lord, “You are my Lord;
all the good things I have come from you.”*

*You, Lord, are all I have,
and you give me all I need;
my future is in your hands.
How wonderful are your gifts to me;
how good they are!*

*I will praise the Lord, because he guides me,
and in the night my conscience warns me.
I am always aware of the Lord's presence;
he is near, and nothing can shake me.*

*And so I am thankful and glad,
and I feel completely secure,
because you protect me from the power of death.*

*I have served you faithfully,
and you will not abandon me to the world
of the dead.
You will show me the path that leads to life;
your presence fills me with joy
and brings me pleasure forever.
— Psalm 16:1-2, 5-11*

Discernment Prayer

Walk with me, good and loving God, as I journey through life. May I take your hand and be led by your Holy Spirit. Fill me, inspire me, free me to respond generously to your call. For I believe you desire my deepest joy, and it is only in your company that my soul will be satisfied and my life will find its meaning and purpose. Amen.

(Sisters of Notre Dame)



3. Gather appropriate data.

Discernment is not magic. We have to do our homework. The efficacy of the subsequent decision can rise or fall on obtaining accurate and relevant information about various options and their implications.

“Discernment asks us to pay attention. We need to attend to both what goes on around us and within us. Ideally, this attentiveness goes on much of the time, a sort of low level, constant spiritual sifting of the data of our experience. But there are times when discernment becomes much more focused, when a crossroad is reached or a choice called for. At times like these the cumulative wisdom of tradition tell us to pay attention on many levels: to consult Scripture, to seek the advice of trusted advisors, to heed the collective sense of the faithful, to read widely and deeply the best ancient and contemporary thinking, to pray, to attend to the prick of conscience and to the yearnings and dreamings of our hearts, to watch, to wait, to listen.” (Wendy Wright)

4. Sort our thoughts and data.

We watch our thoughts as they rise and fall, sorting them into three buckets: thoughts toward self, toward God, and toward evil. We notice which thoughts weigh most heavily on our minds, and eventually we see a pattern arise:

- thoughts toward our self
- thoughts toward God.
- thoughts toward evil

5. Virtually live the decision.

We make a decision to “live virtually.” We gather data, but in our thoughts we act “as if” we have made the decision. We take that tentative “choice” through the sorting process once again: is it toward self, toward God, or toward evil? We notice what the choice says. We try to verify whether, indeed, this choice that seems to be emerging is God’s way for us. If the hypothetical choice still seems viable, we take the decision as a tentative given and “test” it. We put it on and act “as if” it is a decision that is final and to be implemented. Do we feel good about it? Usually if it is God’s way, we feel a profound joy. Even if the decision has difficult consequences, the grace seems to be there to live with it.

Then we keep it in our consciousness “as if” the decision has been made for at least two weeks or more—long enough to watch how we handle the climate of this decision.

While virtually living the decision, it is best not to tell others that the decision has been made because they begin to act as if the decision is “a fact,” and we will end up managing their grief or delight instead of listening to our own interior responses to the decision. We continue to live the two weeks (or another prudent space of time) “as if” we were implementing the tentative decision.

6. Look for a confirming sign.

In this step, we bring the decision back to prayer, asking God to confirm it. We look for the presence of indicators, the touchstones or norms that the tradition suggests are signs of the work of the Holy Spirit. We look for a sign from God that is convincing and supportive of the decision. We check our feelings and see if they are joyful and peace-filled. Even if part of the decision would be hard, there's an abiding grace that enables one to do tough things.

Think of the story of the two disciples who meet Jesus on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection and their "confirming sign" that it was, in fact, Jesus, the Lord.

"Stay with us, the day is almost over and it is getting dark." So he went in to stay with them. He sat down to eat with them, took the bread, and said the blessing; then he broke the bread and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he disappeared from their sight. They said to each other, "Wasn't it like a fire burning in us when he talked to us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?"

— Luke 24:29–32

The disciples knew the deep truth of Jesus' presence with them when their hearts began to burn. It's a wonderful description of what we all might feel when we have followed God's will for us and made a decision that is God-led.

This is an important time to consult others, checking with people who know us well and gathering more data. You may turn to one or two trusted individuals—a family member, friend, co-worker, or religious leader—to walk the discernment path with you. Remember that God speaks to us through our relationships as well as through our interior life. People who love us know us in ways we can't know ourselves. They can see things we may be blind to.



If the sorting of thoughts points to either selfishness or evil; if we can't live in the two weeks of virtually implementing the decision; if there is no confirming sign; if there is no joy, peace, or consolation; if there's a vague discomfort and an abiding restlessness; if there's anxiety that's deep and abiding, then it may be best to go back to step one. Take up another "as if" decision and see if you have more confidence in the alternative option.

But if the "as if" brings joy, and there's grace to do it, and the confirming sign brings peace, then the decision is probably right.

7. Make the decision.

We make the decision, putting it in concrete terms: I've decided to take a job, or move to a new city, or.... The decision is most helpful when it is clear, action-oriented, and you are the subject, the doer. A decision requires the will to act and represents a deliberate choice. It is one of the most awesome things a human being can do: make choices and follow through as a co-creator with God. Notice the decision isn't a goal or an aspiration, but a deed to be done and done by you.

8. Implement the decision.

Seek God's wisdom in working out the practicalities around your decision. Examine the decision you have just made. Ask:

- Can my decision be broken down into steps? If so, note an appropriate order.
- Does anyone need to be informed about this decision in advance of its implementation? If so, what is the best way to do that?
- Who besides me might be involved in carrying out the decision? How will I invite them to this role?
- If some of them choose not to join me, what will I do?
- Who will support me along the way?

If reflecting and praying on these practicalities elicits some fear or resistance, weigh this against the experience of spiritual freedom that resulted from your decision. Ask for the grace to act from that place of spiritual freedom.

9. Ritualize the decision.

Perhaps you can light a candle, or write a letter confirming it, or call a friend, or have a special meal. Mark the day on your calendar. Take the first step to implement your decision.

10. Guard your heart and watch your thoughts.

There's more to implementation than simply doing the work. It includes the interior work of guarding our hearts and watching our thoughts. This takes a lifetime. While implementing the decision, from time to time there will arise the thought, "I wish I had not done what I did." Give these thoughts to God in prayer. We consider our decision final and all "what ifs" as simply temptations that divide our hearts and fragment our minds. We turn to God in prayer.

We may say, "But what if I made the wrong decision?" You made it in good faith and in prayer. If you should go now in another

direction, God will make that evident in a significant way, so for the daily work of implementing this decision you need only attend to carrying out your resolve. We should be at peace because we made the decision in good faith and God will give us a sign if we need to change your decision. Our goal is lining up our external life so that it expresses our intentions to seek God in everyone and everything, all the days of our life.

(The process of discernment is developed from *Tools Matter for Practicing the Spiritual Life* by Mary Margaret Funk and *The Art of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision-Making* by Elizabeth Liebert)

The Benefits of Discernment

Practicing discernment brings many benefits to us as individuals and to our family or household. By practicing discernment we take time to listen in prayer for the voice of the Holy Spirit. We generously listen to the advice of those who love us. We depend on God rather than deciding on our own. We recognize our motivations and the source of our deep gladness. We are able to read both our mind and heart when making decisions. And we are attached to God's love and will alone.

Discernment is a process. We gradually "put on the mind of Christ" (Phil. 2:4; 1 Cor. 2:14) every time we search out and chose that which better aligns with the Jesus of the Gospels, the Christ of faith. A discerning life, then, is composed of repeated discerning moments; likewise, each major discernment rests on many small moments of listening for God in the midst of everyday life. Our intention is that all our decisions will enhance this putting on the mind of Christ. To the degree that they do, we are fulfilling the purpose for which we have been created. In this fulfillment, we simultaneously experience our deepest spiritual freedom.

(Elizabeth Liebert, *The Art of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision-Making*)

Discernment Guide

1. Name the issue.

2. Pray for enlightenment.

3. Gather appropriate data.

- consult Scripture
- seek the advice of trusted advisors
- heed the collective sense and wisdom of the Christian community,
- read widely and deeply the best ancient and contemporary thinking
- pray

4. Sort our thoughts and data.

- thoughts toward our self

- thoughts toward God

- thoughts toward evil

- Is the choice that seems to be emerging God's way for us?

5. Virtually live the decision.

6. Look for a confirming sign.

- Can we live in the two weeks of virtually implementing the decision?
- Is there a confirming sign?
- Is there joy, peace, or consolation or is there discomfort, restlessness, or anxiety?

7. Make the decision.

8. Implement the decision.

- Can my decision be broken down into steps? If so, note an appropriate order.
- Does anyone need to be informed about this decision in advance of its implementation? If so, what is the best way to do that?
- Who besides me might be involved in carrying out the decision? How will I invite them to this role?
- If some of them choose not to join me, what will I do?
- Who will support me along the way?
- If reflecting and praying on these practicalities elicits some fear or resistance, weigh this against the experience of spiritual freedom that resulted from your decision. Ask for the grace to act from that place of spiritual freedom.

9. Ritualize the decision.

10. Guard your heart and watch your thoughts.

Practicing Discernment Daily: Paying Attention to God

The Prayer of Examen helps us look for traces of God's actions in our daily life, individually or as a household. It is usually done in the evening, looking back over the day, or it can be done as a household at the evening meal. You may also use it to pray about any other significant period of time (such as a week or a year).

Allow between five and fifteen minutes for this spiritual exercise. Eliminate distractions during this time: no TV or radio, no iPods, no phones. This is a time of quiet to spend alone or with each other in the presence of God.

- Note the gifts God has given you today. Give thanks for all God's gifts and benefits.
- Ask God that this reflection be a time of special grace and revelation. You can use these words:
Be near us now Lord. Let us look together at the day.
- Review the day with God. Look at the stirrings of your heart, your thoughts, your choices as the day progressed. Which have been of God? Which not? What does God want to say to you about both?
- Give God thanks and ask for forgiveness for any failure or omission, and for healing from their effects. Use these or similar words:
*Gracious God, everything is a gift from you.
I give you thanks and praise for the gifts of today, such as
I ask your forgiveness and mercy for
I ask your healing in*
- Look forward to the next day, and plan concretely with God how to live it according to God's desire for your life. Ask for the graces you desire for tomorrow.
Lord God, continue to be present with me in my life each day.

(The Art of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision-Making, by Elizabeth Liebert)



We want to know that we are making our choices in God, that we are living our life according to the purposes for which God brought us to this particular time and place. We long to see our lives as part of a larger whole, contributing to some greater purpose. We long to experience the presence of God and respond faithfully to that presence.
(Ruth Haley Barton, Sacred Rhythms)

Resources for Living the Christian Practice of Discernment

Go to our project web site
www.lifelongfaith.com
for exciting ideas, practical
resources, and recommended books
and web sites to help you live the
Christian practice of discernment.

Praying

Prayers for Discernment

God our Father,
You have a plan for each one of us,
You hold out to us a future full of hope.
Give us the wisdom of your Spirit
so that we can see the shape of your plan
in the gifts you have given us,
and in the circumstances of our daily lives.
Give us the freedom of your Spirit,
to seek you with all our hearts,
and to choose your will above all else.
We make this prayer through Christ our Lord.
— Based on Jeremiah 29:11–13



Prayer of Thomas Merton

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
Nor do I really know myself.
And the fact that I think I am following your will
Does not mean I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
Does in fact please you.
And I hope I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this,
You will lead me by the right road
Though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore I will trust you always.
Though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death
I will not fear, for you are ever with me.
And you will never leave me to face my struggles alone.