

Practice of Discernment

I. Purposes:

- A. To understand the discernment process by practicing it together
- B. To apply the discernment process to actual situations

II. Suggested Procedure

A. Opening (15 minutes)

1. Light the candle to symbolize God's continual and constant creative and loving presence.
2. Explain that the group will practice applying the discernment process to a specific set of questions. Explain that one of you (the **discerner**) will present the questions and the other one (the **discernment leader**) will guide your group through elements of discernment and the discussion of the process.

B. Briefly review the elements of discernment. Review these guidelines for discernment below. (Led by the discernment leader) (15 minutes)

Begin with a Posture of Indifference

The art of discernment may be one of the most important gifts that Ignatius of Loyola has shared with the Church through his Spiritual Exercises. Compared to regular decision-making, discernment factors in the will of God. In decision-making we are likely to ask questions like "Which is the better option" or "What do I want?" In discernment, on the other hand, the question is more likely to be "What is it that God desires?"

There are situations in which an individual or a community must weigh the facts because a decision is called. In this kind of situation, the individual or community is likely to have weighed options and have already determined that there are preferred options.

Discernment on the other hand begins with a different premise: that we do not come with solutions for which we are advocating or preferred options which we will consider. Rather discernment must begin with an attitude of indifference. When we come to the God seeking God's will and yet already having an inclination, then we lack the posture of indifference and we must acknowledge it as a decision-making situation, not discernment.

This indifference is not apathy or lack of interest. But what Ignatius meant by indifference was freedom. For him, being indifferent means approaching everything with fresh eyes. This is especially applicable in making discernment. Faced with a choice, it would be best, according to Ignatius, not to lean towards one option over the other. To be indifferent means to take a step back and detach oneself from any form of bias that would color the decision prematurely.

But we may ask, is it even possible to approach a decision with no pre-disposition or inclination on the matter? The answer is quite simple but it requires some knowledge about Ignatian spirituality. At its core Ignatian spirituality is about finding God in all things. Ignatius believed that the world and everything in it—from the mundane to the grand—is, to quote Hopkins, "charged with the grandeur of God." And thus the task of every person is to approach the world with open eyes, confident that God is already there. And this is the main goal of discernment: to find God and to find God's will for us.

Why do we have to bother to be indifferent or at least try to do so? Because if we don't, we do not let the God who is in everything reveal himself to us. If we are predisposed already for one option over the other, genuine discernment is impossible because we cannot be moved nor inspired by the Spirit. When we are already sure of ourselves, there is no gap left, no space for God's will to manifest itself.

For Ignatius, indifference meant freedom—freedom from our own biases and inclinations in making decisions which leads to a freedom for God's presence, for God's will, for God himself.

Maintain Prayerful Presence

- Become still and centered in God's presence.
- Let prayerful silence pervade.
- Maintain an attitude of prayerful listening.

Engage in Thoughtful Reflection on the Facts

- Formulate questions for discernment that are simple and non-directive.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions that seem far-fetched. If they arise with insistence, they probably need to be asked.
- Gather information and ideas.
- Explore practical considerations.
- Evaluate the data.
- Resist the impulse to give advice.
- Keep the attention on the focus person. Sharing your own experiences and insights will be a distraction.

Take Part in Prayerful Deliberation

- Pose evocative questions, tapping into the imagination and drawing upon Scripture
- Provide opportunity for reflective responses
- Look for signs of God. Pay attention to where God seems to be breaking through with love, joy or compassion.
- Await consensus

Watch for an Emerging Plan of Action

- Follow the Spirit's leading in developing a plan of action.

C. Presentation Here the focus is on the discerner. The actual discernment process outlined here is led by the discernment leader who should both tell group members what they will be doing and attend to the time frame outlined below. *Spend about 50 minutes total on this.*

- Prayerful silence (5 minutes)
- The discerner presents the questions/issues he or she is asking and discerning. After the discerner has presented, the discernment leader can ask whether there are any questions of clarification. (about 20 minutes)
- Prayerful silence (5 minutes)
- Group members share what they have noticed and felt in response to the presentation of the discerner. Pay particular attention to thoughts and ideas that are repeated and where consensus seems to be emerging. (about 15 minutes)
- Prayerful silence (5 minutes)

D. Take time to review what you've experienced of discernment. (Led by the discernment leader)

Reflect on how discernment worked in your group and how you might improve it.

- Are you truly listening to each other?
- Is there sufficient silence between speakers?
- Is everyone in the group who wants to speak getting the opportunity?
- Have you been looking for signs of the Spirit?
- Are you growing closer to God and one another in your time together?