



Personal Discernment

A process of personal discernment in four movements:

First Movement: Defining the Question
and Listening to God

Second Movement: Exploring the Options

Third Movement: Review

Fourth Movement: Living My Decision

First Movement: Defining the Question and Listening to God

Getting Started

Prepare yourself for discernment by setting aside a solid block of uninterrupted time. Find a quiet, comfortable place and allow yourself to truly be present to God and to the discernment. Turn off your cell phone, IM, etc., forget about your “things to do” list, and give yourself the gift of this time.

This process can be done alone or with others. If done with others, be aware of your own tendencies to let others make a decision for you or to give more credence to their experience than to your own—be careful not to let these things interfere with God’s direction in this process.

Once you have completed the process, and you have “tested” your choice, if you find your choice does not “fit” you may find you need to return to an earlier part of this discernment process. This is a natural part of discernment—discerning among several good options is difficult. Be gentle with yourself and allow for God to work in your life through prayer, feelings, and others.

Opening Prayer

Begin by relaxing and opening yourself to God.

A possible prayer might be:

God, you created the whole world,
full of opportunities for me.

Be present with me in this discernment
both in the options open to me
and in this process.

Guide me to whatever is to be the choice for me at this time.

Free me of whatever may block my understanding.

Walk with me in this time.

Amen.

Defining the Question

In prayer, spend time with the following questions.

You may find it helpful to journal as part of your prayer.

- What is my deepest desire right now?
- How does this desire fit with who and where I am right now?
- How does this desire fit with who and where I want to be?
Write your desire down for later reference.

- Does this desire I have just explored lead to a question?
- What is the question before me?
Be as specific and focused as possible.
- What are the choices before me?
- With what am I seeking assistance from God?
Write down the question to be addressed or decision to be made for later reference.

- How do I see God active in the world right now?
- How does my deepest desire contribute to God's mission in the world?
- How does God work through me in the lives of others?

Scripture Reading

Choose one or more of the following readings to help you enter into prayerful discernment.

Take your time over whatever passage you choose.

As you go through a passage, linger on any phrase that seems to call for reflection (because it seems particularly appropriate to you, here and now; because it challenges you; etc).

After reading the Scripture passage, spend some time in silent reflection.

Psalm 139:1-18, 23-24

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue,

O LORD, you know it completely.

You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;

if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest
limits of the sea,

even there your hand shall lead me,

and your right hand shall hold me fast.

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,

and the light around me become night,"

even the darkness is not dark to you;

the night is as bright as the day,

for darkness is as light to you.

For it was you who formed my inward parts;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
 Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.
 My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
 intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
 all the days that were formed for me,
 when none of them as yet existed.
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
 How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
 I come to the end—I am still with you.

...

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
 test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
 and lead me in the way everlasting.

[Translation: New Revised Standard Version]

1 John 4:1-21

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world. Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

[Translation: New Revised Standard Version]

Other suggested Scripture passages:

1 Kings 3:10-12	<i>Solomon is granted wisdom</i>
Proverbs 1:2-7	<i>What is wisdom</i>
Proverbs 1:20-32	<i>Wisdom as a prophet</i>
Proverbs 17:24	<i>The discerning look to wisdom</i>
Hosea 14:9	<i>The ways of the Lord are right</i>
Jeremiah 17:5-8	<i>Blessed are those who trust in the Lord</i>
1 Corinthians 2: 6-16	<i>Wisdom and maturity</i>
1 Corinthians 12: 4-11	<i>Different gifts but the same Spirit</i>
1 John 1	<i>God is present to us</i>

Gathering Information

- Weigh the facts—what are the options open to me?
- What are the pros and cons of each option?
- Is there other information necessary to my discernment?
 - What is needed?
 - How can I get it?

Second Movement: Exploring the Options

Further Reflection

This section may include time to stretch or walk, time for silent prayer, journaling, or even sleeping on the question—do whatever you need to do. Take time as needed here—discernment doesn't happen on our schedule, but on God's.

Consolation and Desolation are terms often used when speaking about discernment. Consolation is most often characterized by a sense of peace and well-being or a sense of God's presence. Desolation is most often characterized by an uneasiness or the presence of "red flags" in your discernment or a sense that this is not the path that God wishes for you at this time.

- How do what I believe and what I hold dear impact the options open to me?
- What does my gut tell me? My heart? My mind?
- How does my body react to my **options**?
 - Tension, fear, unhappiness, etc. would indicate desolation.
 - Relaxation, peace, joy, etc. would indicate consolation.

*Try out the **option** to which you are most drawn as a **possible decision**.*

- When I take this **possible decision** to prayer do I experience consolation or desolation?

Prayer of imagination

Allow 20 minutes or so for this prayer.

- Begin by relaxing and breathing quietly for a few moments.
- Being mindful of God's loving presence...
- Imagine standing before God (or Jesus) to explain my choice.
- Imagine presenting the options I have weighed and how I weighed them.
- Imagine God's response to each option and to my potential choice.
- Remain aware of reactions of consolation and/or desolation.
- Thank God for this time.
- Spend a bit of time in prayerful silence or journaling before continuing.

*Try out other **options** in the same way as needed before moving on.*

Come to a Decision

- Make a choice!
— in which direction do I believe God is leading me right now?

Do not let yourself be distracted by doubts about your choice. The Third Movement of this discernment will be the moment for careful review. At this time focus solely—in the light of your reading of Scripture, reflection and prayer—on what seems to be the right choice.

Third Movement: Review

Checking Out My Decision

*In light of the choice you have made,
prayerfully consider the following.
Journaling may be helpful.*

- Does this choice lead to consolation? How?
What parts of the choice? Why?
- Does this choice lead to desolation? How?
What parts of the choice? Why?

Revisiting the Questions

*Looking back on your deepest desire, your original question or
decision, and how God is active in the world through you,
prayerfully consider the following.
Journaling may be helpful.*

- Are there attachments holding me back from my choice?
- Is this choice being made in my best interest
or in order not to change?
- Are my emotions of fear, anger, or enthusiasm
unduly affecting my choice?
- What do I need to let go of in order to follow my decision?
- How does this choice bring consolation? Desolation?
- Is my choice in harmony with my deepest desire?
If not, what do I need to change about my choice?
- Does my choice address the question or decision
with which I originally started?
If not, what do I need to do differently in order to answer it?

- How will God work through me in the lives of others in light of my choice?
- How does my choice advance the mission of God in the world? My own mission?

Closing Prayer

Thank God for this time of discernment and for the choice that [has emerged/begun to emerge/needs further guidance] in this decision. A possible prayer might be:

Jesus, my brother,
You walked the earth as I do.
You faced choices and decisions in your life as I have.

Thank you for your presence in my discernment.

Thank you for
the peace in/beginnings of/opportunity to continue to reflect on
this decision.

Bless my decision to

Help me to remain open
to the workings of your Holy Spirit
on this path.

Continue to guide me toward you in all that I do.
Amen.

Fourth Movement: Living My Decision

Some choose to “try out” the product of their discernment for a while before implementing it—this can include sharing the decision with loved ones or just getting used to the idea yourself. If you choose to do this, you may wish to revisit the question of whether your choice brings consolation or desolation after trying it out.

At some point, after prayer and reflection, it is time to live out your choice. Part of living out your decision is letting go of the other options for now. As you begin to live out your choice, remain open to new ways in which this choice is stretching you to grow—to new ways of encountering God, yourself, and others. Each path we take leads to other paths, but, often it does not lead back to where you began.

If at first the decision seems not to be right for you, resolve to do the best you can for a specific length of time before backing away from the product of your discernment. Sometimes it takes time to recognize the good fruits of your decision.

I will live out my decision to

by
