

November 2005 Discernment Virtues

Discernment is our evaluation of inner and outer stuff in light of a relationship to God with a view to response. An individual seeks the “will of God” for a vocation. A congregation “discerns” their next step of ministry. A small group evaluates whether or not they should be involved together in a particular trend. I assess whether that experience I had last week was from God or not. And so on. These are the questions of discernment.

We live in a time where discernment is sorely needed. Forms of church are changing. Christianity is exploding over here and floundering over there. Individuals and communities are wondering how to live the Christian life in contemporary culture. Many of us feel buried in the demands of daily life. God’s presence seems distant. Prophetic voices of one sort and another are proclaiming God’s assessment of it all. And we are left trying to discern--what’s from God and what’s not?

Now if there is one thing I have learned in my studies it is that discernment is not a technique. You can’t just program some “way” of doing discernment which guarantees that you will find the presence, action, or will of God in every case. For one thing, there are too many factors involved. There are the subtle nuances of real life. There are your own mixed motives. And then there is the ambiguity of God himself. Both the writings of spirituality and my observations affirm that the ability to distinguish the things that are from God comes not so much from good *procedure*, but from good *discerners*, from people who have “attuned” themselves to the things of God. In general this “attunement” grows from simply living with God. Yet as we live with God we acquire particular virtues which are especially valuable for discernment. So in order to encourage you to become good discerners, let me take some time here to review a few of these virtues.

Freedom in Faith - Discernment begins in the trust that “God loves us and has a wonderful plan for our lives” (ever hear that phrase before?). Wholehearted faith in God gives us the freedom to step forward, to risk, to make mistakes. There is a kind of approach to discernment which is fearful that if I/we “miss the will of God,” my/our life might be ruined. We *need* that confirming prophetic word from someone, that Bible verse out of nowhere, that special alignment of circumstances. Now while God may work through these things, our discernment is not rooted in them. We are rooted in God’s loving care for us, a care that gives us the freedom to explore, to adventure, to make mistakes and get back up. Freedom born of faith need not suffer anxiously in discernment, Faith is a fundamental orientation toward a personal, loving, generous God. It is this basic orientation of faith that lies beneath what Jesuit founder Ignatius of Loyola calls “indifference.” Indifference is not the state of having no preferences, but rather the free, trusting release of our preferences to the greater wisdom and love of God

Obedience - Jesus says, “Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the

teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own” (John 7:17). Isn’t that an interesting twist. Not that our *knowing* leads to our *doing*, but that our obedient *doing* leads to our *knowing*. Until we live out our openness to God in life, we may not be able to be open to God in discernment. There is some connection between our predisposition to *follow* the guidance of God and our perception *of* that guidance. Ask yourself this question, “How do I respond to God’s presence or guidance when it is made *clear* to me?” I don’t know about you, but often enough for me, it is not with the unclear (and in need of discernment) where I have my biggest problems, but rather with the clear (and in need of obedience). Patterns of blatant disobedience hinder discernment. Think also about those times when you have made decisions as a group. The mutual commitment to live with the well-discerned decision of the group prior to the onset of the process (a community predisposition to obedience) makes a lot of difference in the quality of both the discernment process and the implementation of a discernment decision

Sharing God’s Concerns - As a relationship with another grows closer, we begin to share their concerns. We learn to love what they love, even to feel as they might feel in given situations. We know what the other might choose if they were to face what we face. It is the same with God. As we immerse ourselves in prayer and Scripture reading and practicing our faith, we begin to have a sense of the kind of things God might like. Thus we find “God’s will” most clearly in this sense from an immersion in the thoughts, the commandments, and the values of God as revealed throughout Scripture and history. And as we immerse ourselves in God, we begin to suspect what Jesus might do if he were in our shoes right now. This is a kind of presence and guidance in itself, one which the ancients call a “connaturality” with God (when we naturally share-with-God in aspects of character and life) that shapes our perception and reception of God’s active presence. In this way our discernment of the active presence of God in the “crises” of life is supported by our becoming increasingly like Christ in the “ordinaries” of life.

Listening - Often, we will not hear God if we are not listening. Conversely, those who learn to listen well can hear quite a bit. Discernment is often the fruit of something I call “the attitude of contemplation.” The attitude of contemplation is a kind of open, receptive, relaxed, wonder that waits ready to hear. This attitude is present as we wait for the first note of a concert, as we listen to a beloved friend, as we walk into the next room of the art museum. It can be present in our relationship with God as well. As we cultivate a desire to see God, as we release our expectations, as we leisurely wait for God to communicate in any form he wishes, we open ourselves to “hear” God however he might speak. And like our relationships with others, there are “listening skills” that aid our ability to hear: familiarity with silence and solitude, sensitivity to means of grace (Scripture, sacrament, community, spiritual disciplines, etc.), willingness to let ourselves be confronted with difference, and so on. As we develop our both our attitude of contemplation and our particular listening skills, we increase the likelihood of hearing when God speaks.

Humility - Kees Waaijman writes, “Discernment only works if people unconditionally open themselves up before God, actually give shape to God’s will in their everyday life, and in the

process allow themselves increasingly to be questioned by God.” Open listening is really *humble* listening, a setting aside of one’s own demands in order to be led by God. And often, led by God *through others*. There is a common character you read about in the stories of the desert fathers and mothers. It is the proud, wanna-be hermit who would venture off alone, only to succumb to deceptive impulses of the enemy. Seekers who will not allow another to challenge their cherished perspectives, or to step on their “rights,” will be left alone groping for God. In the later medieval period (A.D. 1300-1500), in the light of the flowering of lay devotional life, the emphasis on humility as constituent of discernment was at times taken to the extreme, as the submissive relationship between late medieval (women) visionaries and their spiritual directors was made the central criterion or condition of the authenticity of spiritual experiences. Humility is not a servile self-abnegation before one’s superiors. With regard to discernment, humility is rather a “making room” for God (and in communal discernment, a making room for God *through others*). Eastern spiritual writer John Climacus (c. 579-649) writes, “the sea is the source of the fountain, and humility is the source of discernment.” God can fit in a vessel that is open.

Prayer - Which leads us to prayer. Prayer nourishes discernment in a number of ways. There is the attitude of contemplation, which shapes the “hearing” of the discerner. There is also the simple “asking” of prayer which leads to receiving: “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you” (James 1:5). To the one who “asks in faith” (verse 6), who rests confidently in God, God loves to give wisdom. So pray, that you might receive. We can also identify a third, more practical, dimension of prayer in discernment. There is kind of a rhythm in discernment, and especially in the discernment of particular situations of life: *out* and then *in*. We go *out* to do research regarding our decision, and then we come *in* to reflect on what we have found. We go *out* to explore our own agendas regarding all the possibilities that lie before us, we turn *in* to explore God’s. We go *out* to talk to others about our experience, we turn *in* to talk to God. Without intentionally creating space for prayer, discernment often gets caught up in the “doing.” Discernment is not just about finding “answers,” but about navigating a relationship with God. In prayer the dynamics of our relationship with God are laid open, ready to be remade.

Wisdom - When we are younger, we must “discern” about this and that. When we are older, and have seen how it goes with this and that, there is less need for intense situational discernment. For, as we grow older, our sense of God’s presence and activity and guidance is informed by *wisdom*. Wisdom is the skill of living in relationship with God, a skill that unites both practical and spiritual knowledge. “Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding,” states Proverbs 3:13. Wisdom not only shapes the need of discernment, it also refines the process of discernment. Wisdom has seen God part the waters and has heard the still small voice, and can listen for both. Wisdom knows how to distinguish fear of failure from “responsible caution.” Wisdom has felt the difference between the accusations of the enemy and the conviction of the Spirit. Wisdom has watched the group and knows its realistic possibilities and limits. As we begin to embody a life of discernment, the practice of discernment shades into the virtue of wisdom. And as the virtue of wisdom shapes the

discerner, there is an increasingly natural perception of God's hand.

Love - Our last virtue of discernment (not in order of importance), is that of love. There is the passionate love for God that will settle for nothing less than wholehearted relationship through all the changes of life. There is the intimate love that is sensitive to the least touch of the Beloved. Love orients our interest, which in turn awakens our sensibilities to perceive God's guidance. Love softens our hearts to submit to God's guidance. Love energizes our drive to follow through for the sake of the one we love. And our love for God also leads us to the love for one another which also shapes discernment. There is the love for one another in communal discernment, desiring sincerely for the common good of the community, focusing on mutual support rather than some ideal of complete agreement. In these ways and more, love gives shape to all the other virtues of discernment, nourishing our faith at the start and empowering our follow-through at the end.

We are a Church in need of discernment. The stormy seas of the years ahead demand navigators who know how to make use of the compass of discernment. I encourage you to decide *now*, before you face the crisis, to become one (or to become a community) who discerns well: who is free in faith to explore a life with God, who is committed to obey what is discovered in discernment, who shares God's concerns through immersion in Scripture, who listens attentively, who humbly releases your own agendas to give room for God's, who prays through life, who seeks the wisdom of skilled living with God, and who embodies love for God and neighbor in every situation.

May we give glory to God the Father
believing in the Son
through the power of the Holy Spirit
both now and forevermore.